The Bible Convictions of

John Wycliffe

STEVEN J. LAWSON

A Long Line of Godly Men Profile
Endorsements

“Every Christian who values the Holy Scriptures and who prizes the gospel of the grace of God in Christ should know about John Wycliffe. Steven Lawson has made Wycliffe’s story—a story of courage, conviction, and gospel passion—accessible and engaging for Christians of all ages. It is a thrilling story, told by a man who exhibits the same gospel passion that animated Wycliffe. Read it, learn from it, and above all thank God for raising up John Wycliffe. Pray that He will again in these days raise up men of like conviction and passion.”

—Rev. Dr. Ian Hamilton
Associate minister, Smithton Church
Inverness, Scotland

“For evangelicals, the Middle Ages are often unknown territory in which they think that the Holy Spirit was not active. But such an idea fails to remember Christ’s promise to build His church, and the Holy Spirit was doing exactly that during the medieval era. This exciting new book by Dr. Steven Lawson powerfully shows how God the Holy Spirit was very much at work in the Middle Ages, and one great example is the remarkable ministry of John Wycliffe, who later generations very rightly called ‘the Morning Star of the Reformation.’ Wycliffe’s love for and advocacy of the preeminence of the Holy Scriptures, though, was not simply a foreshadowing of one of the deepest convictions of the
sixteenth-century Reformers. It needs to fire the hearts of God’s people in these trying times. May this volume be a means to that end!”

—DR. MICHAEL A.G. HAYKIN
Chair and professor of church history
The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

“It is very good to see a new biography of John Wycliffe. I very much commend it for being well researched and written in such a way as to captivate a popular audience. I hope it will go a long way towards rehabilitating Wycliffe (one of my heroes) in the evangelical mind.”

—DR. NICK NEEDHAM
Pastor, Inverness Reformed Baptist Church
Lecturer, Highland Theological College

“We all owe a debt to Wycliffe. He was a forerunner of the Reformation and a forerunner of English Bible translation, leaving a testimony of faithfulness and boldness. We also owe a debt to Dr. Steven Lawson for once again writing such an inspiring and compelling biography. May this book serve to give us all a greater appreciation for and a deeper love for the Word of God and the God of the Word.”

—DR. STEPHEN J. NICHOLS
President, Reformation Bible College
Chief academic officer, Ligonier Ministries
The Bible Convictions of

John Wycliffe
The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles
   Series editor, Steven J. Lawson

The Expository Genius of John Calvin
   by Steven J. Lawson

The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards
   by Steven J. Lawson

The Mighty Weakness of John Knox
   by Douglas Bond

The Gospel Focus of Charles Spurgeon
   by Steven J. Lawson

The Heroic Boldness of Martin Luther
   by Steven J. Lawson

The Poetic Wonder of Isaac Watts
   by Douglas Bond

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The Trinitarian Devotion of John Owen
   by Sinclair B. Ferguson

The Daring Mission of William Tyndale
   by Steven J. Lawson

The Passionate Preaching of Martyn Lloyd-Jones
   by Steven J. Lawson

The Missionary Fellowship of William Carey
   by Mark Dever

The Affectionate Theology of Richard Sibbes
   by Michael A.G. Haykin
The Bible Convictions of

John Wycliffe

S T E V E N J. L A W S O N

Ligonier Ministries
To Dr. Michael Cosgrove

Faithful Servant,
Supportive Friend,
Devoted Student of God’s Word
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own through the centuries, God has raised up an army of valiant Christians who have come from all walks of life—from the ivy-covered halls of elite schools to the dusty back rooms of tradesmen’s shops. These leaders have been called from all corners of this world, from densely-populated cities to rural hamlets.

Despite these differences, each of these pivotal figures possessed one common feature—an unwavering allegiance to the Word of God. Likewise, these stalwarts of the faith held deep convictions about the God-exalting truths known as the doctrines of grace. Though they differed in secondary matters of theology, they stood shoulder to shoulder in embracing these biblical teachings that magnify the sovereign grace of God in salvation.

These truths of divine sovereignty emboldened these men
to rise up and advance the cause of Christ in their generation. These luminous individuals soared with wings like eagles above their times, as the doctrines of grace empowered them to serve God in their appointed hour of history.

This book is a part of A Long Line of Godly Men series, which highlights key figures in the perennial procession of these sovereign grace men. The purpose of this series is to explore how these seminal leaders used their gifts and ministries to further the work of Christ in their time. Because they were faithful followers of the Lord, their examples are worthy of emulation today.

This volume focuses upon the man who was the driving force behind the first translation of the Bible into the English language: John Wycliffe. From the lecture halls of Oxford to the throne room of the King of England, Wycliffe exercised immense influence. His opposition to the Roman Catholic Church fueled courage for generations to come. As the “Morning Star of the Reformation,” Wycliffe paved the way for the Reformers after him. His passion for the common people to have access to Scripture drove his desire to undergo the work of translating the Latin Vulgate into a translation of the English Bible.

I want to thank the publishing team at Ligonier Ministries for their commitment to this A Long Line of Godly Men series. I remain thankful for the ongoing influence of my former professor and late friend, Dr. R.C. Sproul.

I am also indebted to the team at OnePassion Ministries,
who have undergirded my efforts to produce this manuscript. I am immensely grateful to Carissa Early for editing this book and to Brian Fairchild, who helped with invaluable research on Wycliffe. Without their skillful help, this book would not be in your hands.

I thank God for my wife Anne, who has made enormous sacrifices that have allowed me to study and write these pages. The last day will reveal the fruit of her support.

May the Lord use this book to embolden a new generation of believers to bring their witness for Jesus Christ to this world. Through these pages on Wycliffe, may you be strengthened to walk in a manner worthy of your calling. May this biography be used for the exaltation of Christ and the advance of His kingdom.

*Soli Deo gloria!*

—Steven J. Lawson

Dallas

September 2020
It is an old and true saying, that nations sometimes know little about some of their greatest benefactors. If ever there was a man to whom this saying applies, it is John Wycliffe, the forerunner and first beginner of the Protestant Reformation in this country.\(^1\)

—J.C. Ryle

Over a hundred years before the history-altering Reformation, the most influential Englishman of the day was John Wycliffe. As a renowned scholar, Wycliffe was mightily used by God to recover the very truths that would later ignite the fires of the Protestant movement. His Bible-saturated life prepared the path for the Reformation that would follow over a century later. Because of his commitment to Scripture, Wycliffe

was emboldened to become the strongest voice in England for recapturing the gospel. He fearlessly affirmed the authority and sufficiency of the Bible at a time when the empty traditions of the Roman Catholic Church had taken precedence.

The fourteenth century was an especially dark time for the church. Religious superstitions and pagan beliefs had risen to dominate the church and suffocate its life. The light of the gospel had been dimmed. The torch of the truth was nearly extinguished. The gospel of God was buried under the debris of centuries of ruinous error. It was during this dismal time that this prominent English theologian named John Wycliffe stepped onto the stage of history.

At the height of his influence, Wycliffe was the most formidable individual who first initiated the translation of the Bible into the English language. He was the pioneering leader in England who confronted the false gospel of Rome that was so predominant throughout the land. Wycliffe was also the first visible leader in England to recover the purity of the message of saving grace in the preaching of God’s Word. In all these crucial matters, Wycliffe was the primary forerunner, and the repercussions of his ministry are still being felt to this day.

A Day of Extreme Darkness

Prior to the fourteenth century, there had been no exceptional evangelical leader of any large-scale impact in England. To this point, there certainly had been no pulpit ministry that had sent
shockwaves through the nation. Certainly, there was no shortage of preachers among the priests, monks, and friars—but they were predominately blind leaders of the blind. The noted historian of preaching John Broadus acknowledges, “Before Wycliffe, we find little in English preaching that is particularly instructive.” As in the days of the prophets, there was a famine in the land for the hearing of the Word of the Lord (Amos 8:11). Consequently, the people were being “destroyed for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:6).

The religious scene in England was as pitch black as a starless midnight. The gospel was submerged under an avalanche of spiritual ignorance, superstition, and immorality. Sermons were full to the brim—and overflowing—with myths, fables, and empty traditions. Spiritual authority was not founded on Scripture, but on quotes from the church fathers, church tradition, ecclesiastical councils, and the pope. From the pulpit to the pew, the church was filled with unconverted people who were held captive in chains of unbelief. In this bleak era, the blazing beacon of the true gospel was barely flickering.

John Foxe, author of Foxe’s Book of Martyrs, described this dark hour: “Christianity was in a sad state. Although everyone knew the name of Christ, few if any understood His doctrine.” Foxe further portrayed the spiritual bankruptcy in England this way:

The Church was solely concerned with outward ceremony and human traditions. People spent their entire lives heaping up one ceremony after another in hopes of salvation, not knowing it was theirs for the asking. Simple, uneducated people, who had no knowledge of Scripture, were content to know only what their pastors told them, and these pastors took care to only teach what came from Rome.⁴

This shadowy time of spiritual ignorance was a dismal period for the bride of Christ. But gospel light would soon be reignited.

**Unrecognizable as Christianity**

Nineteenth century author J.C. Ryle summarized this deplorable time in pre-Reformation England: “The likeness between the religion of this period and that of the apostolic age was so small, that if St. Paul had risen from the dead he would hardly have called it Christianity at all!”⁵ Thick clouds continued to shroud the English-speaking people.

If the gospel was to be reclaimed and the church restored to her singular gaze upon Christ, many questions needed to be addressed: Does authority over the church rest with the pope

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⁴ Ibid., 32.
and tradition? Or does it rest on the Scripture alone? How can sinful man be made right with holy God? In the providence of God, who would be the influential figure to address these critical issues? And what would be the means by which He would accomplish this mission?

In the gloom of this darkness, God was preparing a man to light the path back to the fountain of truth, and to challenge the purveyors of blinding error. In one of his tracts, Wycliffe declared, “God forbid that truth should be condemned by the church of Christ, because it sounds unpleasantly in the ear of the guilty or of the ignorant.”6 No corner of the church would be spared the illuminating power of Scripture, wielded by this Bible-saturated figure.

**Stepping Out of the Shadows**

To confront these vital issues, John Wycliffe, the leading English intellect of this hour, stepped to the forefront to change the course of history. Wycliffe was the most learned scholar of his day and a professor at Oxford University, the top school in Europe. There, in the esteemed halls of academia, Wycliffe studied and taught at the highest level of scholarship for almost forty years. Possessing a brilliant mind, silver tongue, and prolific pen, Wycliffe became the premier figure

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of his generation who would illuminate the path to recovering the gospel and reforming the true church.

Wycliffe’s entrance into church history marked a new day for the church in English history. To be sure, his path was prepared in part by other men like Robert Grosseteste and Thomas Bradwardine. But Wycliffe was the first biblically sound, theologically grounded preacher with any noticeable spiritual power and extended influence upon the nation.

He was known as the shining “Morning Star of the Reformation.” In the night sky, the morning star is the celestial body that shines brightest during the final hour of darkness immediately before the dawn. In like manner, Wycliffe’s role was to resurrect the first glimmer of gospel truth that penetrated the spiritual darkness of the British Isle in the fourteenth century. History records Wycliffe was the initial bright light to appear in the dark days preceding the formal Protestant movement. He was the sturdy figure who brought biblical truth to the English-speaking world, creating a glorious ripple effect for the centuries that would follow.

Born on a Sheep Farm

Around 1330, John Wycliffe was born into an English family that owned a sheep farm near Richmond in Yorkshire, two

hundred miles from London in northern England. Wycliffe most likely received his early education from the village priest. At sixteen, Wycliffe left home for Oxford, where he enrolled in Balliol College, its oldest college. Three years into his studies, the Black Death, one of the most devastating pandemics in human history, swept through Europe. Beginning in 1349, this plague killed one-third of Europe’s population and left 25 million people dead. The fatal disease spread to England, killing 30–50 percent in its wake in London alone. At Oxford, this terrible epidemic suspended classes and interrupted Wycliffe’s studies, forcing him to postpone his education until school resumed.

This confrontation with death led to Wycliffe’s conversion to Christ. While the exact details of his saving encounter remain untold, it was nevertheless at this time that Wycliffe came to know Jesus Christ and follow Him. J.H. Merle d’Aubigné describes Wycliffe’s conversion:

This visitation of the Almighty sounded like the trumpet of the judgment day in the heart of Wycliffe. Alarmed at the thoughts of eternity, the young man—for he was then a mere youth—passed days and nights in his cell groaning and sighing, and calling upon God to show

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him the path he ought to follow. He found it in the holy Scriptures, and resolved to make it known to others.¹¹

**Brilliance at Oxford**

When Oxford reopened, Wycliffe transferred to Merton College in Oxford, where he graduated in 1356 with a Bachelor of Arts degree. He then returned to Balliol College to resume further studies and became a teaching fellow and Master in the school. In 1361, Wycliffe was ordained to the priesthood and began preaching as the rector of the parish church in Fillingham. Immediately, his pulpit presence was marked by an exceptional ability to expound the Word of God. He then exchanged this pastorate for one in Ludgershall, Buckinghamshire, because it was closer to Oxford. During this time, Wycliffe received his Doctorate of Theology (1366) and Bachelor of Divinity (1369) at Oxford.

Wycliffe soon began his career as a professor at Queen’s College, Oxford, where he gained a reputation as its most brilliant and popular teacher in theology and philosophy. Other professors attended his classes in order to be better educated. Wycliffe spent most of the rest of his life lecturing at this highly acclaimed institution, where he became regarded as the top theologian and philosopher in England. In this academic role, Wycliffe was respected as one of the greatest thinkers of his age. Many claimed he was second to none in European thought.

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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JOHN WYCLIFFE is rightly remembered as the “Morning Star of the Reformation.” He was grounded in Scripture-saturated convictions that drove his vigorous defense of the gospel and his groundbreaking work as the first to translate the Bible into English.

“John Wycliffe honored the Word of God above all else, demonstrating a steadfast loyalty to its unerring testimony.” —STEVEN LAWSON

The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles, conceived by Series Editor Steven Lawson, are designed to introduce readers to significant Christian figures and to show how they used their particular spiritual gifts, personality traits, or ministry abilities in serving God. The goal of the series is to set forth followers of Christ who are themselves worthy to be followed.