

The Bible Convictions of

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# 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

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## **The Long Line of Godly Men Profiles**

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by Steven J. Lawson

*The Unwavering Resolve of Jonathan Edwards*

by Steven J. Lawson

*The Mighty Weakness of John Knox*

by Douglas Bond

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STEVEN J. LAWSON



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To Dr. Michael Cosgrove

Faithful Servant,  
Supportive Friend,  
Devoted Student of God's Word



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# A Long Line of Godly Men

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**D**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,

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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



# Bible Champion

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*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.<sup>1</sup>*

—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

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<sup>1</sup> J.C. Ryle, *Light from Old Times* (Edinburgh, Scotland: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2015), 1.

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.”<sup>2</sup> 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.

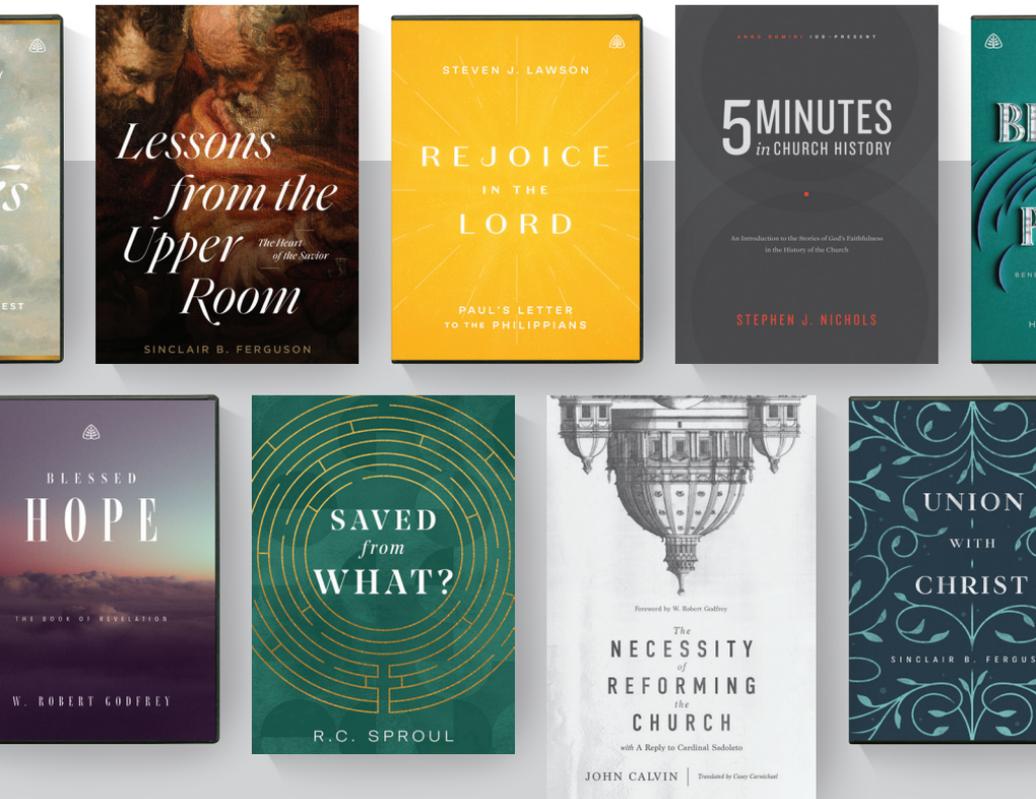
John Foxe, author of *Foxe’s Book of Martyrs*, described this dark hour: “Christianity was in a sad state. Although everyone knew the name of Christ, few if any understood His doctrine.”<sup>3</sup> Foxe further portrayed the spiritual bankruptcy in England this way:

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2 John Albert Broadus, *Lectures on the History of Preaching* (New York: A.C. Armstrong and Son, 1902), 187.

3 John Foxe, *Foxe’s Christian Martyrs of the World* (Uhrichsville, Ohio: Barbour and Co., 1985), 31–32.

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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