

S T U D Y G U I D E



PART 2

ANNO DOMINI  
500-1500

A SURVEY OF

# Church History

W. ROBERT GODFREY



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# A Survey of Church History

Part 2, AD 500–1500

W. Robert Godfrey



LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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# Introduction to the Middle Ages

## MESSAGE INTRODUCTION

Our word “medieval” comes from the Latin terms *medium* and *aevum*, which mean “middle age.” Neglected by some and romanticized by others, the period of the Middle Ages is important for understanding the triumphs and struggles of Christians in Europe and the Mediterranean world during the thousand-year period between the decline of the Roman Empire and the emergence of modern Europe. In this lecture, Dr. Robert Godfrey will offer insight into the historical complexities of the Middle Ages and will explain the approach that this series will take as we explore this important era in church history.

## SCRIPTURE READINGS

John 17:1-26; Romans 12:3-5; Ephesians 2:11-21

## TEACHING OBJECTIVES

1. To explain the complexities of studying the Middle Ages.
2. To introduce the medieval period as a one thousand year experiment in Christian civilization.
3. To describe the three phases within the Middle Ages that will be discussed in this series.
4. To present the importance of examining both theological developments and human experience in the study of church history.

## QUOTATIONS

*Not to know what has been transacted in former times is to be always a child. If no use is made of the labors of past ages, the world must remain always in the infancy of knowledge.*

–Cicero

*To study the past does indeed liberate us from the present, from the idols of our own market-place. But I think it liberates us from the past too. I think no class of men are less enslaved to the past than historians. The unhistorical are usually, without knowing it, enslaved to a fairly recent past.*

–C.S. Lewis

*The central current and ultimate aim of universal history is the Kingdom of God established by Jesus Christ. This is the grandest and most comprehensive institution in the world, as vast as humanity and as enduring as eternity.*

–Philip Schaff

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us.*

–Hebrews 12:1

## LECTURE OUTLINE

### I. Defining the Middle Ages

#### A. When did the Middle Ages occur?

- i. One historian dates the beginning of the Middle Ages at AD 300, while another historian dates it at AD 1100.
- ii. Most historians place the beginning of the Middle Ages around AD 500 or 600, when significant shifts were taking place between the world, culture, and thought forms of the ancient period and those of the medieval period.

#### B. Where did the Middle Ages occur?

- i. While most courses and books on medieval history focus on Western Europe, this approach can be misleading.
- ii. The thought world of the early Middle Ages, even in the western Mediterranean, was still very much oriented toward the East.

#### C. What were the Middle Ages?

- i. The Dark Age?
  1. Many Protestants have tended to view this era as a “Dark Age,” during which few significant developments took place.
  2. Despite such claims, the medieval era was characterized by many important cultural, intellectual, and ecclesiastical accomplishments.
- ii. The Age of Faith?
  1. Some Roman Catholics have argued that the medieval era was an age of profound piety, when Christianity enjoyed its golden age at the center of Western civilization and life.
  2. Although the church held tremendous influence during this period, the truths of Christianity had not penetrated the hearts and minds of the common people any more than they have at other times in history.

### iii. An Age of Change

1. The phrase “Middle Ages” itself implies that this is a period of transition between the ancient period and the modern period.
2. The terms “ancient,” “medieval,” and “modern” delineate three distinct periods with different characteristics and emphases.
3. The Middle Ages produced profound thought, significant institutions, and remarkable political events.
4. The developments of the Middle Ages laid the foundations for the modern era and continue to shape the world of today.

## II. An Experiment in Christian Civilization

- A. The governing ideal of the Middle Ages was the effort to create a society in which Christianity would be the dominant influence.
  - i. Not every person shared this ideal, and those who held it did not always carry it out consistently.
  - ii. Yet, the quest of establishing a stable and secure Christian civilization was the overriding mentality that drove most of the thought and actions during this time.
- B. As we study the ways in which people sought to work out that ideal, live with it, and shape it according to their interests, we can gain insight into our interaction with the culture around us today.

## III. Overview of This Series

- A. This series will examine the Middle Ages in three phases
  - i. Early Middle Ages (500 – 1100)
    1. These lectures will look at the period when the Middle Ages were “warming up.”
    2. During these centuries, various forces and elements inherited from the ancient world were reshaped into what became the characteristic form of medieval life and culture.
  - ii. High Middle Ages (1100 – 1200)
    1. These lectures will focus on the high point of the medieval era.
    2. The “wondrous century” from just before 1100 until just after 1200 contained several significant figures and events.
  - iii. Late Middle Ages (1200-1500)
    1. These lectures will examine the implications and aftermath of the wondrous century.
    2. The accomplishments of the wondrous century were worked out over the next three hundred years, preparing the way for the modern era.
- B. This series will explore two underlying themes throughout the Middle Ages.
  - i. Church and Society
    1. These areas of study will emphasize politics, institutions, and the experiences of medieval Christians.

2. When studying the history of the church, it is crucial to place theological developments within their historical context.
- ii. Paths to God
  1. These areas of study will trace the contours of theology within the Middle Ages.
  2. It is important to understand how people in the past have thought about their relationship to God and to understand how people, institutions, and theology have influenced one another.

#### IV. Warming Up: The Legacy of Rome

- A. When did the Roman Empire end?
  - i. The traditional date attributed to the fall of the Roman Empire is AD 476.
  - ii. Although it is easy to state that the Roman Empire began with the reign of Caesar Augustus, it is more difficult to say when it came to an end.
- B. Over the centuries, many political entities have perceived themselves as the continuation of the Roman Empire.
  - i. After the collapse of the western portion of the Roman Empire, the eastern portion survived as the Byzantine Empire until it was overrun by the Ottoman Turks in 1453.
  - ii. When Charlemagne was crowned as the emperor of the Franks in 800, his kingdom was considered a revival of the Roman Empire.
  - iii. Portions of Charlemagne's empire were later restructured as the Holy Roman Empire, which endured in Central Europe until 1806.
  - iv. After the fall of Constantinople, the Russian Czars saw themselves as the heirs of the Byzantine emperor and therefore of a "third Rome."
  - v. In the 1930s and 1940s, Nazi Germany attempted to depict itself as a new Roman Empire.
- C. Long after the decline of Rome's imperial rule, Rome remained a symbol of power, order, and civilizing ingenuity that captured the imaginations and aspirations of medieval Christians.

#### STUDY QUESTIONS

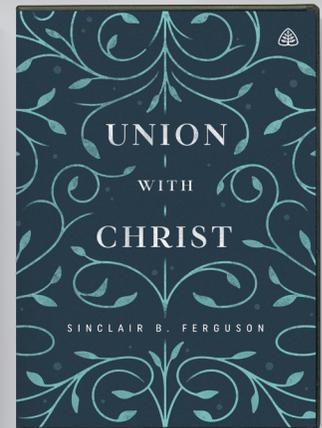
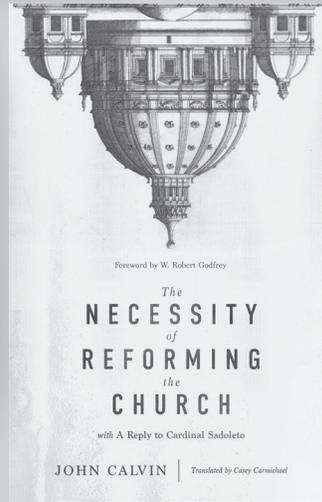
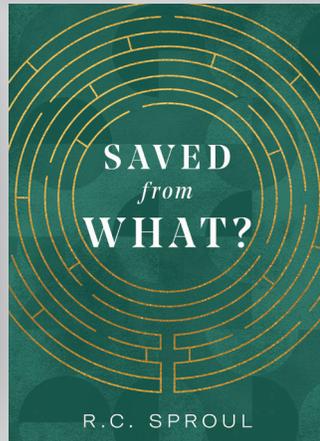
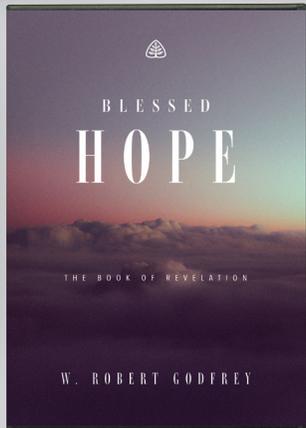
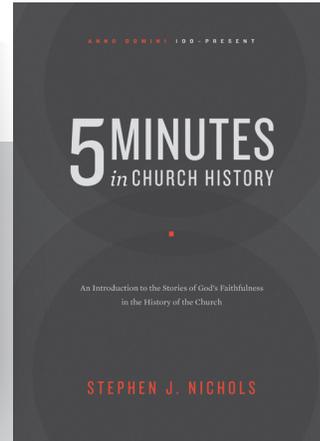
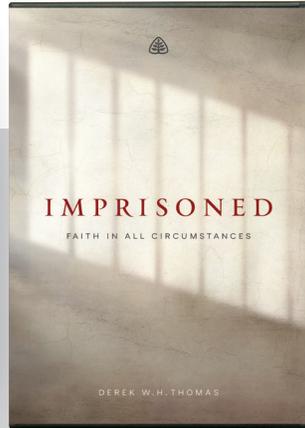
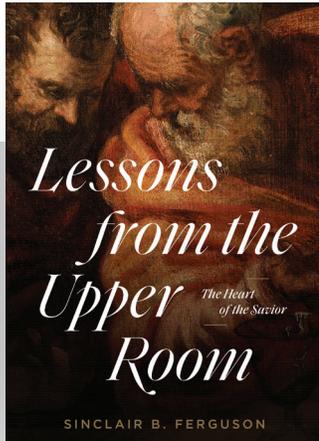
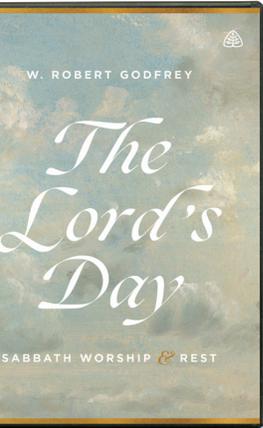
1. Most historians agree that the Middle Ages began around January 477.
  - a. True
  - b. False
2. Which period in medieval history does Dr. Godfrey call "the wondrous century?"
  - a. 500-600, which celebrated the end of Roman rule
  - b. 800-900, during the time of Charlemagne and his sons
  - c. 1100-1200, which marked a high point in the Middle Ages
  - d. 1400-1500, which ended with the discovery of the Americas

3. According to Dr. Godfrey, it is most accurate to think of the medieval era as \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. A dark age
  - b. An age of change
  - c. The age of faith
  - d. The age of reason
  
4. Most of the thought and actions of the Middle Ages were driven by \_\_\_\_\_.
  - a. The pursuit of economic gain
  - b. A man-centered worldview
  - c. The pursuit of a stable and secure Christian civilization
  - d. The desire to break away from the traditions of the past
  
5. The Holy Roman Empire was considered to be a “third Rome” until its dissolution in 1806.
  - a. True
  - b. False

#### BIBLE STUDY AND DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What would you like to learn as you study the history of the medieval church? Why does this period in history interest you?
  
2. How might a person’s theological viewpoint influence that person’s attitude toward the Middle Ages? What does Dr. Godfrey say about common Catholic and Protestant views of this period in history? Why is this period in history so complex?
  
3. Dr. Godfrey reminds us that in the study of church history, theology is important, but it is not everything. What other aspects of the past are important for understanding the story of the church? How can Christians benefit from studying these aspects of church history?
  
4. Dr. Godfrey points out that, at any point in history, there can be a divide between good theology and the actual beliefs and lives of the ordinary people in the church. What are some contemporary examples of this type of divide?

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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