

S T U D Y G U I D E



A TIME FOR
CONFIDENCE

TRUSTING **GOD** IN A
POST-CHRISTIAN SOCIETY

STEPHEN J. NICHOLS

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Stephen J. Nichols



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421 Ligonier Court, Sanford, FL 32771

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A Time for Confidence

INTRODUCTION

History has demonstrated that there is nothing new under the sun. In this lesson, Dr. Nichols pulls from the history of the church to sketch models of godly confidence for us to follow through the cultural confusion of our own day.

LESSON OBJECTIVES

1. To remind us of the importance of putting our confidence in the right place
2. To connect the past with the present to prove it is a time for confidence

SCRIPTURE READING

Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened, and do not be dismayed, for the Lord your God is with you wherever you go.

—Joshua 1:9

What has been is what will be, and what has been done is what will be done, and there is nothing new under the sun.

—Ecclesiastes 1:9

LECTURE OUTLINE

- A. The response of two church fathers to the collapse of the Roman Empire sets the stage for us to begin thinking about where we must place our confidence today.
 1. In 410, the city of Rome fell to the forceful efforts of the Visigoths, prompting Jerome and Augustine to go in two very different directions.
 2. Jerome, who was born in the region of Dalmatia and sent to Rome because of his exceptional brilliance, believed that Rome was the savior of the world.

3. When Jerome perceived the inevitable collapse of Rome, he sought shelter from the world, spending his last year of life hiding in a cave in Bethlehem.
 4. Augustine, the bishop of Hippo Regius in North Africa, witnessed the collapse of Rome and decided to write *The City of God*.
 - a. *The City of God* takes a transcendent perspective on the horizon of the temporary, confessing God's ultimate hand over human history.
 - b. *The City of God* focuses our attention on the kingdom of God and not the shifting sands of culture, confessing its ultimate and eternal reality.
 5. Unlike Jerome, Augustine did not despair in the face of the collapsing empire because his confidence was not merely in the empire but in the eternal God.
- B. We live in a time of fast cultural change and vast cultural confusion, which should prompt us to ask where we are placing our confidence.
1. Many of the socially progressive developments in recent years, in law and pop culture, were not even on the horizon in previous decades.
 2. Our world is becoming increasingly characterized by confusion as categories are being distorted and decisions are no longer being made based on principles.
 3. The cultural development of recent years could be positive if it prompts us to consider the substance of our confidence.
- C. The cultural shifts around us can be withstood only if we recognize that this is a time for courage, conviction, and especially a time for confidence in God.
1. We could say that this is a time for courage or a time for conviction, but most of all, this is a time for confidence.
 - a. We live in a time when it would be easier to conform to expectations, follow the crowd, and cave under the pressure of shifting paradigms.
 - b. We must be morally courageous, praying along with Christian in *The Pilgrim's Progress*, "God grant me the courage to do the right thing."
 - c. We live in a time when the Christian faith is being met with increasing animosity as Christian beliefs become less culturally palatable.
 - d. We must stand by our convictions against the underlying challenge of culture attacking the authority and sufficiency of Scripture.
 2. A moment in the history of Israel underlines the significance of meeting the shifting sands of culture with confidence.
 - a. The prophet Jeremiah was providentially raised up by God at a time when Babylon was overtaking Judah and its capital city, Jerusalem.
 - b. Jeremiah understood that all of Israel had broken covenant and the southern kingdom would be captured just as the northern kingdom was.
 - c. Jeremiah 9:23–24 declares the heart of the Lord toward Israel for them not to trust in wisdom, might, or riches, but in Him.
 - d. Jeremiah was sent to Israel to declare that they had misplaced their confidence and had failed to see the one true God as their one true boast.

3. A moment in the life of Martin Luther further underscores the importance of confidence and the trustworthiness of God in our greatest times of need.
 - a. In 1527, Luther struggled mightily; the Peasants' Revolt had turned many against him, and the plague had struck Wittenberg.
 - b. To make matters worse, Luther and his wife, Katharina von Bora, suffered the loss of an infant child the very same year.
 - c. Despite these tragic events, Luther had confidence in God and wrote the hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God," based on Psalm 46.
 - d. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" points us to the true source of our confidence and strength: God, Christ, Scripture, and the gospel.
 - e. "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" ends with the singular reality and basis for our confidence: His kingdom is forever.

STUDY QUESTIONS

1. What does Augustine's *The City of God* teach us about the right way to perceive periods of cultural change?
 - a. We must understand that cultural change is not a threat.
 - b. We must acknowledge the fact that the world is falling apart.
 - c. We must have a transcendent perspective on earthly realities.
 - d. We must look to our heavenly hope and disregard the world.
2. What did Dr. Nichols suggest could be the greatest benefit to Christians of our modern-day cultural confusion?
 - a. It may lead us to panic to the point that we finally trust God.
 - b. It may lead us to ignore the world and focus only on the church.
 - c. It may lead us to honestly assess where we place our confidence.
 - d. It may lead us to evangelize with greater ease of access in society.
3. Martin Luther's popular hymn "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God" is based on which psalm?
 - a. Psalm 19
 - b. Psalm 23
 - c. Psalm 46
 - d. Psalm 51
4. Augustine's confidence wasn't shaken by the invasion of Rome because he was located in North Africa.
 - a. True
 - b. False

5. The prophet Jeremiah was calling the southern kingdom to covenant fidelity and confidence in the Lord prior to the invasion of which empire?
 - a. Assyrian Empire
 - b. Babylonian Empire
 - c. Medo-Persian Empire
 - d. Roman Empire

6. What is the underlying challenge behind the cultural issues of our day?
 - a. A challenge against the authority and sufficiency of the Bible
 - b. A challenge against the validity of any gender normativity
 - c. A challenge against the biblical definition of marriage
 - d. A challenge against the universal nature of morality

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

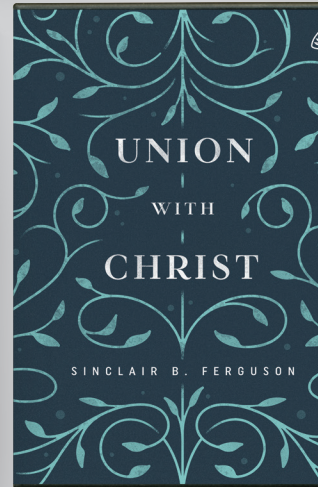
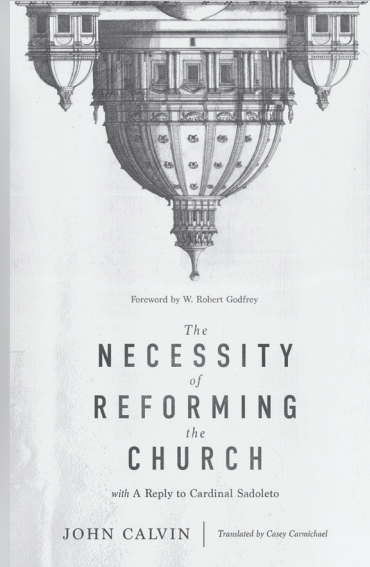
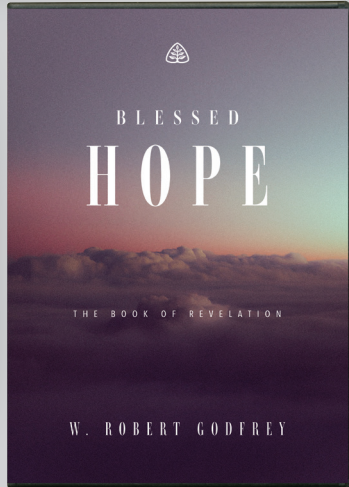
1. What are some of the differences between the reactions of Augustine and Jerome to the fall of Rome? How is the pattern of Augustine's life at this point summarized in some of the key themes of *The City of God*?

2. Describe why it is that Christians need courage and conviction in our day. Why do you think Dr. Nichols has decided to emphasize confidence over the qualities of courage and conviction in this series?

3. Have you personally experienced any animosity toward the Christian faith? In what way has it reinforced that this is a time for confidence?

4. What are some things Jeremiah warns the southern kingdom not to place confidence in? Why would it be tempting to place our confidence in these things in reaction to the invading culture of our own day?

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