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R. C. SPROUL

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LIGONIER MINISTRIES

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Chapter One

What Is Providence?

One day, while I was watching a news program, an advertisement appeared for a series of books about problems of life in the past. One of the images in the commercial depicted a Confederate soldier from the Civil War lying on a stretcher and receiving care from a nurse and a battle-line physician. The narrator then informed me that reading this book would help me understand what it was like to be sick in the mid-nineteenth century. That caught my attention, because many people of the twenty-first

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century are so strongly bound to this time that they rarely think about how people lived their daily lives in previous ages and generations.

This is one area where I find myself out of step with my contemporaries. I think about the lives of previous generations quite frequently, because I have a habit of reading books that were written by people who lived, in many cases, long before the twenty-first century. I particularly like to read the authors of the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth centuries.

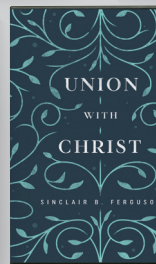
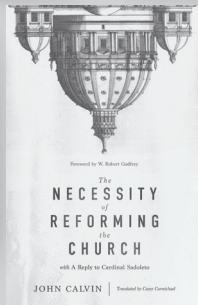
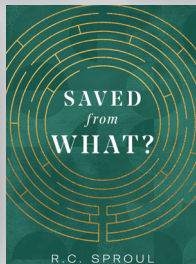
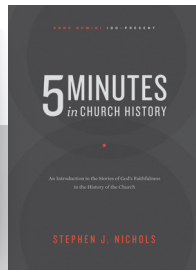
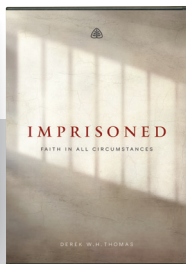
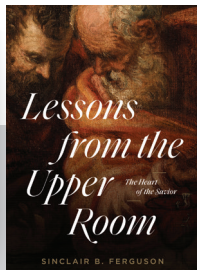
In the writings of these authors I consistently notice an acute sense of the presence of God. These men had a sense of an overarching providence. We see an indication of that sense that all of life is under the direction and the governance of almighty God in the fact that one of the first cities in what is now the United States of America was Providence, Rhode Island (founded in 1636). Likewise, the personal correspondence from men of earlier centuries, such as Benjamin Franklin and John Adams, is laced with the word *providence*. People talked about a “benevolent Providence” or an “angry Providence,” but often there was a sense that God was directly involved in the daily lives of people.

The situation is vastly different in our own day. My late

friend James Montgomery Boice used to tell a humorous story that aptly illustrated the current mindset with regard to God and His involvement in the world. There was a mountain climber who slipped on a ledge and was about to plummet thousands of feet to his death, but as he started to fall, he grabbed a branch of a tiny, scraggly tree that was growing out of a crack in the face of the cliff. As he clung to the branch, the roots of the scraggly tree began to pull loose, and the climber was facing certain death. At that moment, he cried out to the heavens, “Is there anyone up there who can help me?” In reply, he heard a rich, baritone voice from the sky, saying: “Yes. I am here and I will help you. Let go of the branch and trust Me.” The man looked up to heaven and then looked back down into the abyss. Finally, he raised his voice again and said, “Is there anyone else up there who can help me?”

I like that story because I think it typifies the cultural mentality of the present day. First, the climber asks, “Is there anyone up there?” Most eighteenth-century people assumed there *was* Someone up there. There was little doubt in their minds that an almighty Creator governed the affairs of the universe. But we live in a period of unprecedented skepticism about the very existence of

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