

CHAPTER 16

“Today, class,” began Mr. Dell, “I want to introduce you to three men who were prominent in Waldensian history. They were either instrumental in providing protection for the Waldenses, preserving their history or exposing their cruel persecutions. The first man I'd like to introduce you to is the famous English poet, John Milton.



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“John Milton is best known for his epic poem, entitled *Paradise Lost*. And when I use the word “epic” you'd better believe it! The original poem consisted of ten books of blank verse telling the story of the War in Heaven, the Fall of Man, and Christ being the ransom for Adam's disobedience. *Paradise Lost* is considered by many to be one of the greatest literary works in the English language.

“But John Milton is also remembered as a staunch Protestant. While serving, in 1655, as Oliver Cromwell's secretary of foreign tongues, word reached England of a horrific massacre of Waldenses by the Roman Catholic Duke of Savoy. The murder of so many innocent people prompted Milton to write a sonnet entitled, “On the Late Massacre in Piedmont.” Here are the stirring words of Milton's poem:

AVENGE, O Lord, thy slaughtered saints, whose bones
Lie scattered on the Alpine mountains cold;
Even them who kept thy truth so pure of old,
When all our fathers worshipped stocks and stones,
Forget not: in thy book record their groans
Who were thy sheep, and in their ancient fold
Slain by the bloody Piedmontese, that rolled
Mother with infant down the rocks. Their moans
The vales redoubled to the hills, and they
To heaven. Their martyred blood and ashes sow
O'er all the Italian fields, where still doth sway

The triple Tyrant; that from these may grow
A hundred fold, who, having learnt thy way,
Early may fly the Babylonian woe.

“By bringing attention to the cruel and unprovoked treatment of the Waldensian people, Milton created a better understanding of how Rome dealt with her dissenters.”

Flashing another picture onto the screen, Mr. Dell continued, “John Calvin was a prominent figure of the Reformation period. A Frenchman by birth, Calvin (according to Dr. Wilkinson) was a direct descendant of the Waldenses.



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“Born and trained in France, Calvin made a sudden shift from loyal obedience to the Roman Catholic Church to becoming an important thought leader of the Protestant Reformation. Many of his doctrinal understandings were opposite to Seventh-day Adventist beliefs. For instance, Calvin did not believe that when a person dies he rests in the grave until the judgment. He taught 'predestination' or 'unconditional election' (which says that God alone chooses who will be saved or lost – our choices in life mean nothing in determining our destiny) and Calvin saw no need for separation of church and state. Nevertheless, he played a major role in aiding the Reformation and the persecuted Waldenses.

“Because of religious persecution in France, Calvin moved to Switzerland where he spent his later years expanding the Reformation. Having experienced persecution himself, Calvin was sensitive to the plight of the Waldenses escaping papal oppression.”

Continuing with his lecture, Mr. Dell put another portrait on the screen. “Jean Leger was one of the most famous Waldensian pastors. As we have already learned, most of the Waldensian's history was destroyed because of the frequent persecutions they faced. Due to Leger's careful chronicling of their persecutions we have an accurate record of what happened to the Waldenses during his time. His history is outlined in a book entitled *History of the Vaudois of the Piedmont* published in 1669. It is composed of two books. The first one outlines the theology of the Waldensians while the second book chronicles the persecutions faced by the valley people up until the 1660s. Daniel Foucachon calls Leger's book 'one of three most important documents in Waldensian history and theology.'

“In our story today we will meet this courageous and godly leader,” concluded Mr. Dell as he reached for his copy of *Heroes of the Cross*.



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TRUTH VERSUS ERROR

The papacy was frustrated. They had tried all the tools in their arsenal - the sword, stake and starvation – but they had not succeeded in getting rid of the hated Waldenses. That meant they must find a different way to deal with the heretics. The scheme they settled on must have been inspired by the devil himself. It would be a battle between truth and lies. In Hebrews 6:18 we are told that it is impossible for God to lie - He must tell the truth. Satan, on the other hand, can use deceit and intrigue to accomplish his unscrupulous ends.

“I can relate,” exclaimed Cory. “Just yesterday a boy in my tennis class lied then bragged that he wasn't lying.”

“How's that?” queried Mr. Dell.

“You know the rec center has a rule that you can't chew gum. Well, when the instructor asked if he had gum in his mouth, he quickly swallowed it then said, ‘No.’ He *did* have gum in his mouth when the teacher asked him, but *not* when he replied. You could tell he thought he was pretty smart.”

“I wouldn't call that smart, Cory,” replied her teacher. “Satan wants us to believe we are smart when we lie because he knows that liars won't be in heaven. The Bible tells us that Satan is the father of lies and God's children won't have any of his character traits. You need to feel sorry for that boy; he's headed in a wrong direction.”

“How come it seems that liars are the ones who ‘win’ in life?” Jeremy asked. “Those who tell the truth often seem to end up the ‘losers’.”

“That's why we need to see our lives in terms of the big picture - the great controversy between Christ and Satan,” replied Mr. Dell. “God isn't too concerned about us being popular, making a lot of money or having prominent positions here on this earth. His gave us this probation time, this 'second chance', to develop a character that is worthy of heaven. We are told that the 144,000, who have the honor of following Jesus wherever He goes for all eternity, will first follow in His footsteps here on earth. That means that God's people should expect ridicule, lies circulated about them, enemies trying to 'set them up', poverty and perhaps death. That's what life was like for Jesus and also for the Waldenses.

Mr. Dell adjusted his glasses. "Let's continue with our story."

The Bible-keeping Waldenses always practiced strict truthfulness and integrity so it was difficult for them to imagine anyone being dishonest. Their trusting nature made them an easy prey for cruel and calculating men.

Capitalizing on this supposed "weakness", the papacy came up with a new strategy. Two papal leaders by the name of Jacomel (the Roman Inquisitor) and Gastaud (his secretary) came to the Waldensian valleys pretending to want peace. They urged a few small changes on the valley inhabitants in order for them to prove their desire for peace. The Waldenses were required to leave all their weapons at the house of one of the papal magistrates, then several Waldensian representatives would accompany Jacomel and Gastaud to celebrate mass at the church of St. Lorenzo.

Immediately the Waldensian pastors saw danger if such terms of peace were accepted. To give up their weapons would leave them unprotected against their enemies and to accept the Roman Catholic form of worship would open the door to accepting other unbiblical teachings. The pastors urged the people to never accept any policy which would weaken the Church in the Wilderness either physically or spiritually.

Unfortunately, the majority of citizens did not accept the wise counsel of their ministers. As soon as the Waldensians complied with the terms Jacomel and Gastaud had laid down, the two unscrupulous men quickly introduced further demands. Jacomel promised he would order the pope's army to leave the Waldensian valleys if they would give him 20,000 crowns. But paying the money did not stop the papists' demands. The valley people were forced to send deputies to the duke, new taxes were imposed and, worst of all, they were ordered to exile their pastors.

You may ask, Did submitting to Rome's demands bring peace to the persecuted valley people? The answer is a sounding No! Soldiers plundered their houses, pursued the valley people into caves and other hiding places then tortured them. Their oil and crops were destroyed or carried away, and their mills were damaged. The poor trusting Waldenses learned too late that it does not pay to compromise with evil men.

Another illustration of intrigue took place under the direction of the Marchioness de Pianez. She was the head of Turin's "Propagation of the Faith."

"Now that is interesting," Mr. Dell interrupted his reading. "Today we call the 'Holy Office of the Inquisition' the 'Sacred Congregation for the Propagation of the Faith.' Are you aware that the present pope – Pope Benedict XVI – was the head of the "Congregation for the Doctrine of Faith" - the successor to the Inquisition? As we continue reading we will see how the Inquisition operated during the Dark Ages.

The Marchioness de Pianez organized Roman Catholic women into a "society." These women were assigned to go into Protestant homes as cooks, seamstresses or maids and spy on their employers. If there were problems in a family, the women would do things to further agitate trouble whether between husbands and wives or between children and their parents. The women were authorized to provide money to impoverished Protestants if they would attend the

Catholic mass. Some Protestants were enticed with promises of important positions, while others were offered financial assistance to expand their business if they joined the Roman Church. Twice a week the women spies reported everything they had learned to the Marchioness.

The Marchioness' society was formed for the express purpose of getting rid of all heretics. Her "undercover agents" were instructed to spread lies about any Protestant who would not cooperate with them. Yet, the Marchioness' society was not the only means of gathering information on Protestants. Many, including laymen, priests, nobles and peasants, were part of Rome's vast spy network. Each person reported to a superior above them. The vast network went from the smaller towns, to large cities and finally all the way to Rome, "where in the words of Leger, 'sat the great spider that held the threads of this mighty web'" (*History of the Waldenses* 133). With stories like these, we see the wisdom of Waldensian parents in teaching their children to be guarded in their speech.

Pastor Leger chronicled a frightful story of deception on the unsuspecting Waldenses. A papal general, Pianezza, who had been severely humiliated by the Waldensians in previous battles, decided to use a new strategy against them. He apologized to the mountain people for the actions of his troops and said he would prevent any further attacks. He assured them that they had nothing to fear. However, as a gesture of their forgiveness toward their persecutors, Pianezza asked that the Waldenses allow his soldiers to sleep and eat in their homes for a few days. After that, he promised, he and his soldiers would withdraw and the valleys would be peaceful and safe again. Pastor Leger and other Waldensian leaders cautioned the people against opening their doors to papal soldiers, but they ignored their wise counsel and history records the tragic results.

The humble and trusting Waldenses agreed to Pianezza's request. Throughout the valley soldiers moved into Waldensian houses to eat at their tables and sleep in their homes. Here is how J.A. Wylie recorded the scene: "At last the blow fell with the sudden crash of the thunderbolt. At four o'clock on the morning of Saturday, the twenty-fourth of April, 1655, the signal was given from the castle hill of La Torre....On the instant a thousand assassins began the work of death. Dismay, horror, agony, woe, in a moment overspread the valleys of Lucerna and Angrogna. Though the victims climbed the hills with what speed they could, the murderer was on their track. The torrents as they rolled down from the heights soon began to be tinged with blood. Gleams of lurid light burst out through the dark smoke that was rolling through the vales, for a priest and monk accompanied each party of soldiers, to set fire to the houses as soon as the inmates had been dispatched" (*History of the Waldenses* 140).

The fortunate ones died quickly while the rest were tortured in unspeakable ways. Leger, the pastor who escaped by fleeing to the mountains, wrote about the cowardly massacre. He declared, "My hand trembles so that I scarce can hold the pen, and my tears mingle in torrents with my ink, while I write the deeds of these children of darkness, blacker even than the Prince of Darkness himself" (*History of the Waldenses* 141, 142).

One of the final and most horrible chapters in the history of the Waldensian Church began on January 31, 1686. Some months before, on October 22, 1685, the king of France had issued an edict saying, among other things, that the Waldenses could no longer worship or have religious meetings. Their churches were to be destroyed, and all pastors and teachers must become Romanists or leave the valleys within fifteen days. He decreed that all children be trained as Roman Catholics or their mothers would be whipped and their fathers sentenced to five years as galley slaves.

What heartrending decisions to make! Some Waldenses swiftly escaped to friendly

Switzerland, Germany or Holland to live in exile from their beloved valleys. Those less decisive were thrust into filthy Italian prisons where 11,000 out of the original 14,000 died from starvation or disease. In December of 1686, the remaining 3,000 prisoners, now sick and emaciated, were released in the dead of winter. Without proper clothing or food, many died on their way to freedom. However, for those who survived the rigors of traversing Switzerland's snow-clad mountain passes there was a very special welcome. John Calvin and the patriarch Gianavello opened wide the doors of Geneva to God's persecuted children and tenderly nursed them back to health.

After this terrible chapter in the history of the Waldenses the winds of change began to blow throughout Europe. William of Orange, the staunch Protestant king, sat on the throne of England. The Dutch had defeated the French king and the Duke of Savoy was kept busy with putting down an uprising in his territory.

In June of 1688 Henri Arnaud, who acted as both pastor and general to Geneva's Waldensians, organized a small band of 800 men to return to their native lands. Although some men deserted because of hunger, cold, fatigue and battle, seven hundred men arrived back in the village of Prali. The first thing they noticed was their church. By God's grace it was still standing! Immediately the men threw out the statues and other popish relics from the sanctuary and held a rededication service. Henri Arnaud preached a heart-stirring sermon on Psalm 129 tracing the history of their people. He highlighted how their fathers had preserved both land and faith in spite of Satan's attacks. He encouraged the men to look to God for courage, wisdom and strength to again rebuild their valleys.

Some, like M. Tron-Poulat, had shown foresight by preparing for that rebuilding. Before being forced into exile M. Tron-Poulat had taken the all-important millstone from his mill and concealed it in the river. One of his first tasks on returning to his valley was to retrieve the stone from its watery hiding place. Quickly he repaired his mill and plied his trade once more. That same industrious spirit was seen throughout the sheltered Waldensian valleys as life slowly resumed amid the towering peaks.

In the spring of 1689, the Duke of Savoy offered peace to the weary and persecuted Waldenses. They gratefully accepted his offer and pledged their support to him as their ruler. Mary of England, wife of William III, helped in the resettlement of the valleys by pledging money to pay salaries for pastors and teachers. The States-General of Holland raised money to rebuild and refurnish the burned and ransacked Waldensian schools and churches. Not wanting to be excluded from the generosity, Swiss Protestants contributed by setting up scholarship funds for students coming to their country for advanced education.

With God's blessing and typical Waldensian determination, towns and lands were soon prosperous again. Many exiled Waldenses now felt safe to make their way back to their ancestral homes. Although there were occasional skirmishes and battles, relative peace and freedom again enveloped the valleys of the Waldenses.

“They must have been so happy to have peace again,” commented Ashley. “I can’t imagine living in fear like that! I’m glad I’m not a Waldensian.”

“We can be glad we have freedom in our country,” agreed Mr. Dell. “It is a real blessing to be able to read our Bible, worship in our churches and live as we choose. But let's not forget that persecution builds character and trust in God. I’m afraid that many today would not be willing to give up comfortable homes, tasty food, and good-paying jobs in order to obey God’s Ten Commandments.

Trials always reveal our true character.”

J.A. Wylie, *History of the Waldenses* (Pacific Press Publishing Assoc., Mountain View, California, 1977)

B.G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant: The Church in the Wilderness* (Teach Services, Brushton, New York, 1994) Chapters 15, 16

Daniel Foucachon, (who traces his ancestors back to Henri Arnaud's brother)

(http://www.foucachon.com/Huguenots_Waldensians.pdf)