

53. THE WALDENSIANS

Lyons, the large city on the Rhone River in France, had been a wealthy trading city for centuries, ever since the first Christian persecutions. Remember Blandina and Ponticus (chap 11)? Lyons was and remained the Silk City.

In the middle of the twelfth century, around 1150, a wealthy merchant lived in Lyons. His name was Peter Waldo.

He was married and lived in luxury.
He was not very fussy about religion.

Because he was wealthy, he could - and did - enjoy life to the full. He hosted many extravagant dinners and parties, where he and his friends became quite merry. He did not worry about the serious side of life. He kept thinking: 'Not now, that's for later.' He decided he would first enjoy his wealth.



Peter Waldo. learnreligions.com

However, that suddenly changed in the year 1160, when God converted him. We do not know for sure how this conversion happened.

Some writers tell us that a wealthy friend had invited him to a banquet.

They ate and drank and became extremely merry. Suddenly, in the middle of the party, one of the

guests collapses in a heap and dies. This unexpected death leaves a huge impression on all those present!

Suddenly sober, they stand around the lifeless body of their friend. They can't do anything to help him. Death has taken him.

Peter Waldo also stands there. A deathly pallor has replaced the smile on his face. It is as if a voice in his heart asks:

"What if it was *you* laying there?"

Peter cannot answer that question, or rather, he can't give a *positive* answer because he realises only too well that it would have been too late for him.

He leaves the party.

That night he cannot sleep.

He keeps seeing his dead friend lying on the floor in front of him.

One minute laughing and healthy, and the next minute in eternity!

That could also happen to him, and then conversion is no longer an option that he can think about later!

That sudden death made such a tremendous impression on him that his life completely changed from that moment.

This happening was possibly the beginning of his conversion.

Other writers tell us that one day he heard the legend of Alexius. Alexius lived in Rome. However, the first night after his wedding, he fled from Rome to the city of Edessa. He lived there for seventeen years as a beggar. Eventually, he returned to his parental home, where he lived under some stairs for another seventeen years, poor and forgotten.

Supposedly that legend made such an impression on Peter Waldo that he repented and became a Christian.

These two stories show that the direct cause of his conversion is not known. Whichever the case, in the year 1160, a significant change took place in

his life. Instead of feasting and living a carefree life, he went to church.

RADICAL CHANGES

One day a minister tells him the story of the rich young ruler who came to Jesus with the question: "Good Master, what good thing must I do that I may have eternal life?" The Lord answered: "Go, sell all you have, give it to the poor, and follow Me."

Surprised, Peter Waldo looks at the minister and ... he makes his decision! That rich young man Jesus was talking to went away sad because he had great possessions, but *he*, Peter, shall obey that command of Jesus!

He gives his house and properties to his wife. He divides the rest of his wealth among the poor. From now on, he only wants to live for the Lord. Naturally, that was over the top because that was not what the Lord Jesus meant. The rich young man could not part with his wealth, and the Lord Jesus wanted to make him realise that, so he would discover he needed a Saviour.

But Peter Waldo follows that command literally. He buys a Latin Bible. In those days, they were very costly because the printing press had not been invented yet. So the Bible Peter bought was handwritten, possibly copied by a monk.

However, Peter does not know any Latin. So he organises a religious linguist to translate sections of that Bible into French. The Psalms and the Gospels would have been part of it. Peter Waldo reads these portions and is very blessed through these readings.

He also has that linguist translate many of the writings of the church father, Augustine. They also become a blessing to him. From now on, he has one purpose in life. He wants to bring God's Word to the people to be a blessing to many others!

In 1177 he establishes a society of men and women. These people live very plainly and simply. Because of that, the people call them: 'The Poor of Lyons.' At first, these people are busy copying portions of God's Word, which the linguist had translated. When that task is complete, Peter

sends them out two by two to preach. They call the people to repentance, and they preach the Gospel. Let us accompany two of them; then we can see how they are doing this.

'MARKETING THE GOSPEL'

The heavy knocker falls on the door of a house in the South of France. The lady of the house opens the door and is surprised to see two men standing there with salesman's packs on their backs. They are dressed very simply. When she asks them what they want, one of the men replies: "Do you need anything? A nice scarf for instance, or a nice dress or a ring?"

Obligingly, the speaker lets his pack slide from his shoulder, opens it, and shows the lady the merchandise he has neatly arranged in his pack. As he pulls out a lovely scarf, he tries to persuade her:

"Look at this scarf, isn't it beautiful? We are selling them cheap. Or do you need something else?"

The woman immediately sees that these men are marketing valuable, good quality items. She has seen lots of door to door salesmen, but most of them had worthless rubbish in their backpacks. Many of them were also rude and insistent in



*Waldensian missionaries disguised as peddlers.
Mediastorehouse.com*

their actions. That's why it often happened that the women, annoyed by their ill-mannered nagging, would slam the door closed in their faces. Grumbling, they would slowly move on.

But these peddlers have quite a different approach. They are not rude, nor insistent, but rather the opposite. They are polite and modest, and the woman immediately notices that. Besides, the merchandise they are displaying is certainly not rubbish!

Usually, she never allows peddlers to come inside but does business with them at the door. It was not safe to let them in, for many rough, unsavoury people wandered along the highways. However, the conduct of these people arouses her trust, and so she invites these peddlers inside. They conduct their business in the home. Then suddenly, one of the peddlers says: "Madam, I have something else with me, something which is more valuable than all the other things put together."

This remark makes the lady very curious. Surprised, she looks at him and asks:



Waldensian missionaries disguised as peddlers.
Mediastorehouse.com

"What else do you have in your pack then?"

And then, the peddler opens a secret compartment in his backpack and pulls out some handwritten pamphlets. Amazed, the woman looks at the salesman and curiously asks: "What is that? "

The peddlers tell her what these pamphlets are about. They are sections of God's Word which they have neatly copied.

They recite entire chapters from memory!

The woman listens attentively.

What these men are saying is fascinating!

She calls her husband, for he must hear this too!

Those peddlers speak to them earnestly about sin. They point out to them that they must renounce sin and be sorry for the evil they have committed. They point out to them that they must repent. But they also speak about the Saviour Who came to earth to save sinners. When they stop talking, they leave some of those pamphlets behind. They put their unsold goods neatly back into their packs and with a friendly greeting continue their travels. Enthusiastically they visit the next house.

But in the house they have just left, the husband and wife bend over one of those pamphlets and astonished and reverently, they read it. They seriously think about what they have heard from these incredible peddlers. They cannot stop thinking about those words, those earnest admonitions, and the gospel message that Jesus came to save lost sinners. Nobody has ever spoken to them like that before! And if they cannot read, they talk about what the peddlers said and decide to ask one of their friends to read it out loud for them.

They have never heard *that* in church! No wonder that this simple preaching has left a deep impression on them!

When they finally get back to work, they continue to think about it. Today has become a wonderful day for them, a day they will not forget in a hurry!

In the meantime, the two salesmen entered another home and repeat the same routine. Tirelessly they keep at it. Sometimes they are chased away with a snarl, or the owner slams the

door in their face, but they are not discouraged. On the contrary, they cheerfully try again at the next place.

They are not the only ones doing this. Oh no, everywhere in Southern France, we may see similar peddlers travel around. They go from house to house, always polite, always friendly.

We know who these peddlers are! They are 'The Poor of Lyons', the followers of Peter Waldo. They are called *Waldensians*.

THE FRUIT OF THE WALDENSANS' WORK

Every day these peddlers worked tirelessly to spread the Holy Word of the Lord among their ignorant fellow countrymen. Every day they spread the seed of the Gospel. They are like farmers who sow a field and then let God give the increase.

That seed germinated and grew and bore fruit, rich fruit. The Lord richly blessed that simple labour. Wherever God's Word comes, it always bears fruit. The preaching the Waldensians brought was different from the preaching of the

Roman priests. Their actions were completely different from the actions of other peddlers. They were not abusive; they did not curse; they did not threaten. They performed their tasks calmly and with dignity. Cheerfully they went from house to house. Their conduct inspired confidence. And so, it was not surprising



The traditional emblem of the Waldensian church is a candle on top of a Bible. The motto above the symbol reads "Lux Lucet in Tenebris," meaning "a light shining in the darkness."
Public domain

that people everywhere began speaking about them with respect and admiration.

The Roman clergy soon noticed that something was going on. They saw that preachers were travelling around. This did *not* make them happy!

On the contrary, they became indignant! Who did those men think they were? They would not tolerate that!

They were the preachers!

Those peddlers were doing *their* work!

They complained about those peddling preachers to the bishop of Lyons, and the bishop agreed. Preaching was the work of the clergy. The laity was not allowed to do that. Nor were these so-called peddlers! They did not have the proper knowledge! If they allowed them to continue, they would endanger the church! That's why the bishop of Lyons immediately and sternly forbade the Waldensians to preach.

Endanger the Church?

No, that was not their intention at all! Such a thought had not even entered their heads! Their only aim was to bring God's Word to their fellow countrymen! Of course, they did not agree with all the Roman Catholic doctrines. They believed it was nonsense to pray for the dead and did not consider it necessary to give money to help them get out of purgatory. The Roman Catholic doctrine teaches that the souls of the dead do not go straight to heaven. They first must spend time in purgatory to be purified. The Poor of Lyons did not believe that.

They also rejected the doctrine of indulgences. They preached that only God could forgive sins through the blood of Jesus Christ. If the Lord does *not* forgive your sins, then indulgences cannot help you, and if the Lord *does* forgive your sins, you don't *need* an indulgence because the blood of Jesus Christ cleanses you from all sins. They also opposed the swearing of oaths and condemned wars.

Their main aim was to preach God's Word in their native tongue. That was a thorn in the eyes of the Roman clergy! But even that angry clergy had to admit that the Waldensian lifestyle was in harmony with their words and doctrine. They did not swear, blaspheme, or act rudely and lived a proper, decent lifestyle.

They were conscientious in the way they brought up their children.

That alone already aroused the fierce hostility of the Roman clergy because *they* lived in selfish, godless excess and luxury!

The influence of the Roman church on ordinary people declined, while the effect of the Waldensians increased daily. Through their preaching, thousands began to think for themselves. As the gospel spread more and more in their native language, it opened many people's eyes to the Roman Catholic Church's errors. That's why the clergy was so angry and resentful and tried all sorts of things to make it impossible for the Waldensians to preach. However, the Waldensians did not let that worry them but faithfully continued with their blessed labour. Their preaching and blameless conduct caused more and more people to follow them.

ENMITY AND PERSECUTION INCREASES

When the bishop of Lyons saw that the Waldenses did not obey his command to stop preaching, he accused them before the pope. The pope was very concerned to learn that simple peddlers were actively preaching all over the place. That was not on! He immediately issued a papal command for them to stop preaching. But the Waldensians did not obey this command either! So they were excommunicated in 1184.

Now dark times began for the Waldensians, times of oppression and persecution, grief, and sorrow. The persecution which exploded against them caused them to scatter and flee. Many found a hiding place in the Western Alps. Surrounded by high mountains, they settled in the valleys between those mountains.

Others fled further away. They ended up living in various countries of Europe: in Italy, Germany, England and Bohemia.

Peter Waldo remained the leader of the Waldensians. He roamed around everywhere. Eventually, he settled in Bohemia, and in 1197 he died there. However, after his death, the Waldensians did not disappear. On the contrary! Their influence continued to spread and grow.

Through their inspired preaching, they prepared the way for the Reformation in many parts of the country



A Waldensian courtyard. Wikipedia

The people listened to them eagerly. For that they suffered severe persecution.

The Roman Catholics killed thousands and hunted them as wild animals, but the Waldensians continued to grow! They still exist today!

The Roman Catholics tried everything they could think of to destroy them, but they failed. Once a pope tried to make a monastic order of the Waldensians, but the Waldensians refused.

Then in the year 1215, they were excommunicated again! The persecutions became even fiercer, even more cruel! However, it was not easy to reach them in the deep valleys and clefts of the Western Alps. There they built their churches. Their emblem was a burning torch with the motto: 'The light shines in the darkness.'

That's exactly how it was. Through their inspired preaching, they prepared the way for the Reformation in many parts of the country.

The Roman Catholic clergy certainly did not repent through the preaching of the Waldensians! Instead, they did everything they could to silence them. Rome would not listen to the warnings and admonitions of a group of peddlers! They believed God's Word was not allowed to spread among ordinary people. The light was not allowed to shine in the darkness!

Here God's Word is fulfilled:
"Men have loved darkness rather than light
because their deeds were evil."

The Waldensians, those faithful witnesses, were so cruelly and abominably persecuted that we cannot describe it. Just as they preached crusades against the Muslims, the Roman Catholic clergy now preached crusades against the Waldensians.



Massacres against the Waldensians
<http://metalonmetalblog.blogspot.com/>

Large armies forced their way into the valleys where the Waldensians had found refuge. The papal soldiers knew no compassion. In the year 1209, the clergy sent the first large crusade against them. The cattle grazing in the pastures were either killed or stolen. Their houses were destroyed or burned. The cornfields were trampled flat. They purposely destroyed other crops. They cut down the fruit trees. In a word, entire prosperous districts were transformed into a wilderness by those murderous and destructive soldiers.

And why?
Even their enemies had to admit that the Waldensians lived a blameless life. One of their fiercest enemies even said about them:
"They are orderly and modest. They live in all simplicity and diligently work as tradesmen or farmers to provide for their families. In their actions, they are honest and sincere. They hate and avoid all deceit. They do not visit taverns. In their spare time, they either study or teach. Many men and women know the entire New Testament by heart. We do not hear cursing or blasphemy among them."

Is it not humiliating for their enemies that they had to give that testimony of them?
And yet, they would not leave them in peace but hunted them down and persecuted and murdered them!

Why?
Because they would not obey the Roman Catholic clergy.
Because they would not and could not believe all the falsehoods the Roman Catholic Church taught them.
Because they studied and preached God's Word diligently.
That was their only crime; that's why Rome went all out to destroy them entirely.

One time four hundred mothers and their children had fled at the approach of the papal army. They had hidden in a cave to escape from the murdering papal soldiers. As quiet as church mice and with anxiously beating hearts, they did not move, hoping that their persecutors would not find them.

Alas, despite their caution, they were discovered. And what did those murderers do?
When they discovered their hiding place, they made a big fire at the entrance of that cave. The wind blew the smoke into the cave and choked all those mothers and children to death. Isn't that horrific?

But we can be sure that the righteous Judge of heaven and earth will avenge that innocent blood. These days many people would rather ignore these events and not talk about them. They even dare to say:
"It is not very Christian-like to remember such things!"

Even people who *call* themselves "Protestants" say such things! But they *are* not Protestant! They are in league with Rome!

But must we then hate Roman Catholic people? No, of course not! We *may* not hate those poor deceived people. We must pray for them that God opens their eyes and delivers them from the bondage of the Roman Catholic Church and draws them out of the darkness.
Call them names and ridicule them?

Never do that. Show them compassion.

They don't know any better.

They are purposely kept in ignorance and fear by their church leaders.

Our conflict is not against the Roman Catholic *people* but the Roman Catholic *doctrine*.

We may not forget this history because it is the truth. *God* does not forget either!

INTO THE ALPS

It is a very severe winter. Especially in the high Alps, it is freezing cold. The frigid east wind howls around the high peaks.

Deep snowdrifts block the roads across the Alps. No one risks crossing those high mountains in this biting cold. It is too dangerous. And yet? Look, a large group of people are on the move.

Who are they?

Who is risking their life in this bitter winter weather and braving this fierce cold?

It is a group of Waldensians who must flee for their life!

A gang of murderous soldiers are approaching their village. They must quickly leave their safe, warm homes and escape into the desolate mountains. The women and children walk at the front. In the rear come the men who are carrying on a bitter fight with the pursuing papal soldiers



Statue of Peter Waldo at the Luther Monument in Worms.

while trying to flee. Some women are carrying their babies in their cradles.

They wade through thick, knee-deep drifts of snow. A mother stumbles. She gets up with difficulty and struggles on. Then another loses her footing and

stays down. She can't go any further; it is extremely cold, so high up in the Alps. The plaintive cry of the freezing infants calls for pity, for compassion! But the cruel pursuers have no sympathy. Their evil eyes glow with blood lust. In pitiless fury, they press on and drive the poor Waldensians ever higher into the mountains. Desperately the Waldensians defend themselves and try to keep the soldiers at bay. Many fall, fatally wounded. Their blood colours the snow red, and that colour sparkles in the sun. The soldiers kill the injured where they fall.

The sad group struggles further, higher, ever higher into the mountains, into the killing cold to escape the cruel persecutors. Finally, the papal soldiers stop their pursuit. Smirking and satisfied, they return to plunder the abandoned homes. When the tired Waldensians stop a moment to catch their breath, they count one hundred and eighty infants who have frozen to death in their cradles. Through exhaustion and misery, more than one hundred mothers have collapsed and succumbed to the cold. Numerous men and fathers are lying dead in the snow, brutally murdered by the swords of the fierce, bloodthirsty persecutors. Older people lie on the side of the road, frozen to death, their frozen eyes raised as if they were accusing their murderers. Only a tiny group reaches the other side of the Alps.

But He Who dwells in heaven, He Whose eyes are all-seeing, has also seen this atrocity. He has heard the dying groans. The pathetic whimpers of the innocent babies have ascended to Him, Who lives forever. He knows and understands the deeply felt sorrow of the parents who stand by their darlings who froze to death. Won't He as Judge of heaven and earth do right?

Indeed! Woe to those murderers! Woe to those who are guilty of such atrocities! The blood of the Waldensians will burn on their consciences for all eternity! And then to think that all this, supposedly, was done in God's Name! We shudder when we think of it.

I could go on and fill volumes with stories like this. Only God knows how much those poor

Waldensians suffered. One day, on the great day of judgement, He will avenge this inhuman, devilish cruelty.

It is unbelievable that people believe we should keep silent about all this and hush it up. They say this history is not suitable to tell our children.

But our children *must* know what has happened. We *may* not hush it up because it is the absolute truth! Some stories are even worse, but I do not dare tell them!

One persecution followed another. The Roman soldiers cruelly murdered thousands and thousands of Waldensians. In despair, Waldensian girls jumped from the mountains into unfathomable depths to escape the soldiers' rude, abusive, grasping hands. One city of the Waldensians counted twenty thousand dead.

Other districts of Europe were not left in peace either. In the German city of Bingen, Rome burned eighteen Waldensians at the same stake at the same time. In Mainz, the same happened to thirty-five, and in Strasbourg, fifty Waldensians burned at one stake. The worst of it all was that the clergy told the papal soldiers that they were performing good works by doing this. They said: "Everything is permitted against those heretics. They are vermin, pests that you must exterminate! That's the only way to stop their heresies from spreading!"

THE INQUISITION

Especially the Inquisition constantly urged the papal soldiers on in their gruesome task. The Inquisition? What was that again?

We explained in the previous chapter that there were always people who wanted to make changes for the better during those dark times. But every attempt to improve the situation met with resistance from the Roman clergy. The bishops of the various cities were supposed to seek out the heretics. Everyone who deviated from the doctrine of the church was called a 'heretic'. The bishops had to find those heretics, examine, and punish them. But according to the pope, those bishops were too soft on those accursed heretics.



*Girls trying to escape the soldier's rude advances.
Looandlearn.com*

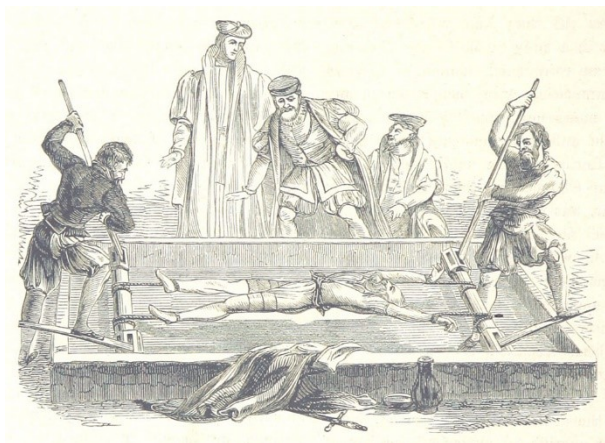
So, the pope appointed people who were not lenient.

In the year 1229, the pope instituted the Inquisition. There had been interrogators before, but in 1229 it became an official organisation under the direct supervision of the pope. The Inquisition became judge and jury for the heretics, judging and punishing them for their faith. They had to initiate an inquiry about the beliefs of the people.

These interrogators performed their work with unbelievable severity and cruelty. If the interrogator did not trust a man or a woman, they immediately put those people on the rack. In this manner, through horrible torture, they tried to squeeze a confession from them. If they succeeded, then those poor people were delivered to the civil courts. The Roman Catholic Church pretended they were not the ones shedding blood. I purposely write here "pretended" because the Roman Catholic Church did shed that blood in reality. She caused it. The Inquisition pronounced the death sentence, and then the civil judge had to administer that

sentence. The penalties imposed and pronounced by the Inquisition were often inhuman. The ruling was usually lifelong imprisonment or death. Their possessions were 'confiscated'. That means the family could not keep the possessions of the condemned, but they reverted to the church. At times the state also seized them.

The pope introduced the Inquisition to almost all European countries. They ruthlessly performed their terrible, heartless work. Tens of thousands became victims of that 'tribunal of faith'. We will hear more about that later.



Tortured on the rack. Britannica

This Inquisition has played an essential role in the persecution of the Waldensians. They constantly launched new attacks on the Waldensians. Yet despite all that, the Roman Catholic Church failed in exterminating the Waldensians.

Later, when the Reformation came about, they had contact with the reformers. Even Calvin visited them in their valleys. He talked with them and preached in their churches.

Originally it had never been the intention of the Waldensians to break with the Roman Catholic Church, but later they did have very close contact with the reformers.

In 1535 a new wave of persecution erupted against them in Southern France, followed by another in 1545. During that time, twenty-two Waldensian villages went up in flames. The Inquisition *again* killed thousands of people.

In 1570 they were *again* persecuted and viciously put to death.

In 1685, *another* bloody persecution erupted against them!

Can we tell you all those horror stories? Impossible! No pen can describe the grief and pain they suffered over and over again!

But there is a book of remembrance before God's face. God will require their blood from the hand of Rome. Like Saul hunted David as a partridge in the mountains, the Waldensians were not left in peace by the Roman Catholic Church. Yet Rome did not achieve her purpose. God maintained and preserved them from extinction.

All this happened within God's decree, but those who made themselves guilty of these atrocities remain responsible for their actions and will have to render account to the Judge of heaven and earth!

Again, we see something of the great conflict between Christ and the devil.

QUESTIONS

1. Identify Peter Waldo. Summarise his life up to the year 1160.
2. Why did Peter give away his wealth?
3. What was meant by the 'Poor of Lyons'?
4. What tasks did the 'Poor of Lyons' perform?
5. How did the 'Poor of Lyons' spread the Gospel message?
6. How did the peddlers show they were Christians in their walk of life? In other words, how were they different from other peddlers?
7. What errors of the Church did the Waldensians oppose?
8. Why were the Roman Catholic clergymen so angry when they observed that the peddlers spread the Gospel message?
9. How did the Waldensians react to the pope excommunicating them?

10. Explain the emblem of the Waldensians, 'The light shines in the darkness.'
11. List the results of the first crusade against the Waldensians.
12. Why were they persecuted so severely? List three reasons.
13. What was the Inquisition?
14. What is a heretic?
15. What methods did the Inquisition use to obtain confessions?
16. What punishments were imposed by the Inquisition?
17. Compare the life of the Waldensians with that of David when fleeing from Saul.

FOR FURTHER STUDY

1. This chapter states the following: "Wherever God's Word comes, it always bears fruit." Find a text in the Bible to support this statement.
2. Why was the clergy so worried about God's Word spreading among the people?
3. Read Revelation 6. Which verses refer to martyrs such as the Waldensians? When will God avenge the blood of His elect who were killed for His sake?