

“On Eagle’s Wings”

THE CHURCH IN THE WILDERNESS

Joe Maniscalco

The Eagle

He clasps the crag with crooked hands;
Close to the sun in lonely lands,
Ring’d with the azure world, he stands.
The wrinkled sea beneath him crawls;
He watches from his mountain walls,
And like a thunderbolt he falls.
- Lord Tennyson

The Italian Alps

Above the rugged mountains the eagle soars. Its home is the lofty Italian Alps. Here it builds its nest. Long ago a people called the Waldenses also found a place to build their homes in these same high mountains.

As the Alps are approached from the south, they rise like a towering wall along the horizon. Pastures and chestnut forests clothe their base, while white snow crowns their summits.

No feature can add more to the impressive grandeur of a mountain landscape than the presence of an eagle. Whether sailing aloft in the blue sky or feeding beside some lonely spring, the spirit of solitude seems to find expression in the eagle’s fierce eye and noble bearing. Hardly another creature intrudes upon its domain. How like the loneliness and isolation of the eagle’s habitat was the life of the Waldenses, God’s church in the wilderness.

God led the Waldenses (also called Vaudois) out from the busy haunts of men into the hushed solitude of the great sanctuary of nature. Here their ears would always be able to hear God’s still small voice, and here the Waldenses might worship God according to the dictates of their own consciences. Determined to maintain their allegiance to God and to preserve the purity and simplicity of their faith, the Waldenses traded an easier life in the fertile lowlands for the stern discipline of the mountain country. Rough physical conditions and hardship would develop in them a noble independent life. In secluded glen and rocky fastness the Vaudois contended for “the faith which was once delivered unto the saints.” (Jude 3)

It was not the proud hierarchy known as the Roman papacy, enthroned in the capital city of the world, which was the true church of God. In the very country where popery had fixed its seat, there its falsehood and corruption were most steadfastly resisted. Instead of worshipping in the imposing cathedrals of Italy which spoke only of the greatness of man’s powers, the true “church in the wilderness,” the Waldenses, worshipped in temples not made with hands—the mountains of His holiness. Building their “nest” amid the mountain scenery of the Alps, “riding upon the high places of the earth,” the Waldenses remained, among all other peoples—what the eagle is among birds: a people secluded, set apart, reflecting in moral fiber the elevation, grandeur, and simplicity of their mountain home.

Courtship

“There be ... things which are too wonderful for me, ... which I know not: The way of an eagle in the air.” (Proverbs 30:18 - 19)

It is beautiful to watch a pair of eagles in courtship. It begins when a female eagle carries a stick high up into the air. She drops it near a male eagle. In response to her act and to show his interest, he swoops down, catches the stick, and returns it to her. This dropping and returning of the stick may be repeated many times.

Once the male and female have chosen each other, they soar through the sky together in a dance. A beautiful example of this is the fish eagles' dance which begins when both are high in the sky. The male flies above the female coming down on her with feet and talons stretched out. Just before he reaches her, she rolls over on her back and reaches out with her feet. The two lock each other's feet, and with wings spread wide, fall toward the earth. Just before they hit, they break apart, fly upward, and begin again.

Eagles sky-dance in the early part of courtship until they begin to build the nest. They seem to mate for life, their literally falling in love toward the earth symbolizing "until death do us part."

The faithful Waldenses were married in a spiritual sense to God who promised, "I will betroth thee unto me in faithfulness: and thou shalt know the Lord." (Hosea 2:20) No invention of Satan could destroy their union with God. "Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.

Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord." (Romans 8:35-39) The world would see that even death could not separate the Waldenses from their God.

Nesting

Eagles usually choose a high crevice or a tree crotch on which to build their nest. Most eagles nest in the early spring. It takes many weeks of hard work to build a nest. The eagle-couple usually build it together. The male is the collector, and the female puts the nest together. The female may also gather sticks.

"Doth the eagle mount up at thy command, and make her nest on high? She dwelleth and abideth on the rock, upon the crag of the rock, and the strong place." (Job 39:27, 28)

Eagles like to make their nests on high places where beasts of prey cannot disturb them; in inaccessible pinnacles of rock are one of their preferred sites. For similar reasons, the Waldenses made their homes in inaccessible places too.

The eagle's nest is made of branches and sticks that the eagle picks up from the ground with its feet or beak. The Waldenses had to use the materials found in the mountains to build their simple, rugged homes. You recall that eagles prefer to nest in the high places. The Waldenses did not prefer the high mountains; persecution drove them there. They chose self-denial rather than slavery of conscience.

In making their nests, eagles add some strange materials. They use brambles, thorns, and briars, making sure as they are shaping these into a nest that the thorns turn inward. Next, the eagles cover these thorns with wool and other soft materials. There the mother eagle lays her eggs and hatches her young.

The nest is the eagle's home, and the area around it is called its nesting territory. The Alpine mountains became the "nesting territory" for the Waldenses.

Eagles may live in the same territory for years and lay eggs in nests of almost indestructible materials. Devotion to a strong home life is thus symbolized. This virtue the Waldenses also held dear.

The eagle is a lonely bird. It lives in lofty regions far from the homes of men. The isolated environment which eagles choose for their home has a special advantage. It allows the eagle to care for its family and to skillfully train its young. A similar environment helped develop in the Waldenses very close-knit families. The training of their young was always uppermost in the minds of the parents.

The Wilderness

He who will live as an eagle goes into the higher levels where cloudless day reigns. To abide in the sunshine of God, he must consent to a comparatively lonely life. No other bird is as solitary as the eagle. Eagles never fly in flocks. But the life that is lived unto God, though limited in human companionship, knows divine fellowship. This was the experience of the Waldenses who gave up the friendship of the world. Yet they were not alone. They could say, along with their Master, "He that sent me is with me: the Father hath not left me alone; for I do always those things that please him." (John 8:29)

To develop the eagle-like characteristics of the human soul—the power of soaring high and seeing far—the Lord still leads His children at times into the wilderness. Of the last generation it is written, "He shall dwell on high: his place of defence shall be the munitions of rocks: bread shall be given him; his waters shall be sure." (Isaiah 33:16) Many a weak and timid soul has become strong to do and bear through the stern discipline of the mountain solitudes, the granite of the rocks having entered into his blood. Many with a restless, fiery disposition have been subdued by the awful silence and steadfast patience of the hills.

Italy

Italy is a beautiful country. In the north there are snowcapped mountains and Alpine meadows. In southern Italy we find a mild climate influenced by the Mediterranean Sea.

Long ago, in the middle of this picturesque country, sat the Roman church as a queen, attempting to rule the consciences of men. "And here is the mind which hath wisdom. The seven heads are seven mountains, on which the woman sitteth." (Revelation 17:9) "For she saith in her heart, I sit a queen." (Revelation 18:7) The seven mountains form seven valleys at Rome. Each valley was a fortress with its own gate. Caves and rocks and mighty chestnut trees formed places of retreat and shelter.

In the northern Alps dwelt the true church of God, the Waldenses. It is believed that the Waldenses were at one time in southern Italy and were driven by persecution to the Alpine valleys. As if carved from the mountains, these Piedmont valleys spread out like spokes in a giant wheel, with all the qualities of a mighty fortress.

"And the woman fled into the wilderness, where she hath a place prepared of God, that they should feed her there a thousand two hundred and threescore days." (Revelation 12:6)

The woman mentioned in Revelation 12:6 was a symbol of God's true church sheltered in the wilderness (mountains) of northern Italy. Wilderness means an "uninhabited place." There God would protect (or nourish her) and care for her for over a thousand years. In the wilderness this simple people, the Waldenses, raised their young and prepared them for a martyr's death here-and a victor's reward in the hereafter!

A Bright Light

The corrupt Roman church was very powerful in the twelfth century. Their leaders thought all the world should believe and worship as they did. They used force to make people honor the Roman religion which did not agree with the religion of the Bible.

Amid this darkness of papal rule shone a bright light from the valleys of the Piedmont Alps. The Waldenses obeyed and kept the truths of the Scriptures. Because they had the Bible in their native tongue, they could study and understand for themselves. They would not worship images, and they kept the Bible Sabbath. For these reasons the Roman church hated and persecuted them. Their simple, heroic story is a worthy example for God's people who live at the very end of time. "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles..." (Isaiah 40:31)

Soaring

Many times an eagle travels long distances to find food. It takes a great deal of energy to stay high in the air. If it had to flap its wings all the time it would use its energy too quickly. To conserve its strength, it soars.

To soar, an eagle must ride the natural currents in the air. Eagles ride the warm air currents (called "thermals") that rise from the ground and go up many miles. Like an elevator the current lifts them upward. Strong winds push the thermal along; the eagle stays with the thermal for a free ride.

If there is no wind, the eagle can circle in the thermals, going higher and higher. Then it glides across the sky for miles, slowly losing altitude until another thermal lifts it again. The eagle must follow the laws of nature to survive. So the Waldenses obeyed the laws of Scripture that they might also soar for God. "... they shall run and not be weary; and they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

An eagle's wings are designed for powerful flight with as little effort as possible. The tapering feathers at the end of the wings are called primaries. They are the most important wing feathers. The eagle can move them like fingers for better control in strong winds; these also help the eagle glide efficiently.

The laws of Scripture are designed to give God's people a very powerful experience as they live in this world. The word of God helps the Christian have better control in the strong winds of adversity.

The eagle looks heavier than it really is because of all the feathers covering its body. A bald eagle has about seven thousand feathers covering it. It only weighs about eleven pounds because most of its bones are hollow to facilitate flight. Appearances can be deceiving. Often God's people seem over-powered by the forces of Satan. But God has assured us, "... my grace is sufficient for thee: for my strength is made perfect in weakness..." (II Corinthians 12:9) Never was a man stronger than when Christ submitted "... unto death, even the death of the cross." (Philippians 2:8)

Alpine Valleys

In the Alpine valleys the Waldenses planted crops and harvested the wheat, grapes, and figs, as well as the local chestnuts. The warm sunny days caused the snows to melt and run down the mountain side, watering the gardens and providing water for the flocks of sheep and goats.

The warm summer days found the men and boys with the flocks in the high pastures on the mountainsides, while the women and girls and older men worked in the gardens below.

Their songs of praise echoed from hill to hill as they faithfully did their work in obedience to the Word of God.

Their songs were especially sweet on the Sabbath day when they met together as God commanded them, to worship Him who made the heaven and earth. "...They pointed their children to the heights towering above them in unchanging majesty, and spoke to them of Him with whom there is no variableness nor shadow of turning, whose word is as enduring as the everlasting hills. God had set fast the mountains and girded them with strength; no arm but that of Infinite Power could move them out of their place. In like manner He had established His law, the foundation of His government in heaven and upon earth. The arm of man might reach his fellow men and destroy their lives; but that arm could as readily uproot the mountains from their foundations, and hurl them into the sea, as it could change one precept of the law of Jehovah, or blot out one of His promises to those who do His will. In their fidelity to His law, God's servants should be as firm as the unchanging hills." (GC 66)

"Thou shalt have no other gods before me."

"Remember the sabbath day, to keep it holy." (Exodus 20:3,8)

Eaglet

After the nest is built the female eagle lays her egg. The eagle is a very devoted bird. It may sit on its egg without moving from the nest for as long as three days. The male and female parents do take turns sitting on the egg. In about forty-two to fifty days it hatches. Just before it hatches a chirping sound is heard from inside the egg. The baby eagle, or eaglet, then cracks the shell as it makes its way out.

The newly hatched eaglet's legs are weak and helpless, and it cannot even lift its head. Its eyes are open, but it cannot see very well. The baby is covered with soft, downy feathers; however, the parents must still keep it warm. Parenting is taken up by the mother and father eagle with much patience. They carefully train their young how to live on its own.

The Waldenses raised their children in their mountain fortress "nest," preparing their children for hardships. These God-fearing parents also carefully trained their children to stand alone for the truth. Vaudois youth were taught discernment, forbearance, self-discipline, and discretion. "To be discreet, chaste, keepers at home, good, obedient... In all things shewing thyself a pattern of good works." (Titus 2:5, 7)

The female eagle stays with the new baby most of the time and the male brings food to her. Two to three days after hatching, the eaglet has its first meal. Mother teaches it how to eat by holding little strips of meat on the tip of her beak. The baby curiously pecks at it then takes the food, after which it will eat about every hour or so.

The blood and flesh of beasts is a part of the eaglet's diet. The Waldenses were made strong through the blood of the Lamb. "Except ye eat the flesh of the Son of man, and drink his blood, ye have no life in you." (John 6:53)

"From thence she seeketh the prey, and her eyes behold afar off.

"Her young ones also suck up blood: and where the slain are, there is she. (Job 39:29, 30)

Waldensian Children

The Waldensian children learned from the Bible in home school. They needed to eat the spiritual food of Scripture to mature in God's ways. Wise parents understood that they would not always be free to worship God as the Bible taught. The children were taught to be true to the Bible, to memorize much Scripture, and to work hard. Daily they learned how to care for animals, how to grow fruit and vegetables, and how to protect themselves from the dangers of the mountains.

"Parents, tender and affectionate as they were, loved their children too wisely to accustom them to self-indulgence. Before them was a life of trial and hardship, perhaps a martyr's death. They were educated from childhood to endure hardness, to submit to control, and yet to think and act for themselves. Very early they were taught to bear responsibilities, to be guarded in speech, and to understand the wisdom of silence. One indiscreet word let fall in the hearing of their enemies might imperil not only the life of the speaker, but the lives of hundreds of his brethren; for as wolves hunting their prey did the enemies of truth pursue those who dared to claim freedom of religious faith." (GC 67)

They taught their children whole chapters of the Bible so if the written copies of the Bible were lost, large portions of it might be secured in the memories of their young men and maidens. In secret meetings, when they went by night barefooted, or with shoes bound with rags, so that they might not be heard in passing, it was their custom to listen to the Gospels recited in turn by the young, each one responsible for a certain portion. The most important lesson they were to learn was to be faithful to God "even unto death." They were never to put confidence in strangers, for the Roman church constantly sought to persecute them.

Growing

In a few days the young eaglet doubles its size. It grows quite quickly. In two to three weeks it can stand strongly and even tear its own food apart. Parents begin to bring live prey to the eaglet so it can practice the skills of hunting.

The female eagle stays near the nest to guard the young eaglet. Eagle parents now only need to keep it warm in cold weather and, of course, at night. The mother also protects it from the hot sun or rain. The male continues to bring them both food. Baby eaglet is eating more and more as it is rapidly growing.

“Who satisfieth thy mouth with good things; so that thy youth is renewed like the eagle’s.”
(Psalm 103:5)

In about three to five weeks after hatching, the young eagle’s first feathers begin to grow replacing the fluffy down. The eaglet’s downy feathers are exchanged for a thicker coat, in preparation for the harsh climate of its habitat. It spends a lot of time combing its new feathers with its beak, so that the feathers are fluffy and warm.

On top of the eaglet’s tail is a gland that produces oil. The young eagle rubs its beak over the gland then spreads the oil over its feathers to make them waterproof.

The eaglet becomes more and more active and jumps up and down in the nest becoming stronger and stronger. The large nest is a good place for it to exercise. It practices gripping with its talons. It pretends to hunt, jumping up and landing with talons spread. Or it may grab a stick from the nest and crush it with its beak. This play helps the eaglet prepare to hunt. Both parents can now hunt; the eaglet can spend longer times alone.

Flight

During the ninth or tenth week the eaglet can weigh forty times its birth weight. It now has all its feathers and starts to stretch and flap its wings regularly.

For approximately ten weeks the eaglet has enjoyed the security of its nest with both father and mother bringing it food. Then the mother eagle may begin to fly close to the nest with food, without stopping. If this does not tempt the hungry eaglet to seek food for himself the mother eagle tries a different approach. She begins to make home a little less desirable place to be.

The mother eagle reaches into the nest and pulls out the soft covering from the thorns earlier built into the nest. The little eaglet’s home suddenly becomes unbearable with no comfortable place to be found. When the eaglet gets up on the edge of the nest, the mother eagle comes along and sweeps it off with her wing. It goes fluttering down, down, down, flapping and squawking toward the rocks below.

The eaglet has never been in the air before. It has always been in the nest. It appears that its mother is cruel to deal with her young that way. But she knows that these temporary hardships are the best way to train her young one to fly. Just when it seems as though the eaglet is doomed to be dashed on the rocks below, the mother eagle swoops down and catches it on her wings. Then she bears it upward and deposits it safely in the nest again; or she may drop out from under the eaglet, in which case flight instruction begins again.

“As an eagle stirreth up her nest, fluttereth over her young, spreadeth abroad her wings, taketh them, beareth them on her wings: So the Lord alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him. He made him ride on the high places of the earth, that he might eat the increase of the fields; and he made him to suck honey out of the rock, and oil out of the flinty rock.” (Deuteronomy 32:11-13)

The mother eagle goes through this process with her eaglet many times, but each time the eaglet struggles, it is gaining strength. In speaking of this care over His people, God says, “I bare you on eagles’ wings...” (Exodus 19:4) The Hebrew word for “bare” translates “lift.” This is another way a parent eagle assists its eaglet in the flight. As the parent flies alongside, whirlpools of air formed by its feathers provide the eaglet with additional lift. Soon it takes short flights from branch to branch of the nest tree.

As the young eagle becomes a better flyer, it will join the parents in hunting. It takes time for the young bird to become skilled, but the parents are patient teachers. Until it becomes a good hunter, it must stay with its parents, or it could starve. After four or five months it is feeding itself and away it flies to find its own home area in which to live.

Most eaglets fly from their nest sometime between their tenth and fifteenth week of life. However, sometimes an eaglet may not want to leave the security of the nest. In this case, the parents may withhold food. Instead of bringing dinner to the nest, the parents will place it on a nearby limb. Finally hunger will motivate the eaglet to leave the nest.

Hunger for the word of God motivated the Waldenses to leave behind the earthly security the world promised. They learned to soar spiritually as “they sought their meat to relieve their souls.” (Lamentations 1:19)

Growing Children

The early training of the Waldensian children was important to the survival of the truth of God. “The Waldenses had sacrificed their worldly prosperity for the truth’s sake, and with persevering patience they toiled for their bread. Every spot of tillable land among the mountains was carefully improved; the valleys and the less fertile hillsides were made to yield their increase. Economy and severe self-denial formed a part of the education which the children received as their only legacy. They were taught that God designs life to be a discipline, and that their wants could be supplied only by personal labor, by forethought, care, and faith. The process was laborious and wearisome, but it was wholesome, just what man needs in his fallen state, the school which God has provided for his training and development. While the youth were inured to toil and hardship, the culture of the intellect was not neglected. They were taught that all their powers belonged to God, and that all were to be improved and developed for His service.” (GC 67, 68)

The Waldensian children were trained from babyhood to become strong spiritually, mentally, and physically. Remember, “They that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint.” (Isaiah 40:31)

The eagle shows parental care and love for its young, but not as some other birds display attachment to their offspring. Notice the eagle stirring up its nest to cause the young ones to leave it. Also at times a parent carries the eaglet out of its nest on its back, spreading its wings beneath the eaglet in order to support or inspire it with confidence in its first flight. All this work of training and education come from the parent eagle’s affection, no doubt; but it brings before us more the grander than the softer aspects of the eagle’s nature. Its affection is manifested more in the form of power than tenderness.

In some ways the Waldenses were like the eagle with their young. They loved souls and the truth too much to keep their children beside them. Instead they supported and inspired in their children a missionary zeal that would lead them away from the affection and safety of the home circle-to the lands beyond. There they had a sacred mission to fulfill, sometimes at the cost of their lives.

Enemies

The Roman church leaders finally decreed that if the Waldenses did not stop practicing their religion and join the Roman church they would be destroyed. The brave Waldensian Christians refused to give up the truth of the Bible. They were willing to die rather than lose the right to worship God as the Bible taught.

The eagle is designed to reach its full potential through the disciplines that are required of it in hard times. Violent storms enable the eagle to reach its highest flights. Thus it was with the Waldenses. The storm of persecution that broke over their heads only made them rise to greater heights of loyalty and devotion to God.

Did you know eagles have enemies? Their greatest enemy is man. Men destroy their homes by cutting down trees where they nest. Men pollute the rivers and lakes with chemicals that kill or poison the fish that eagles eat. Men shoot or even poison the eagles.

The greatest enemy of the Waldenses was the Roman Church. The Roman officers were angry with the Waldenses. Soldiers were sent to arrest them. Many were taken by force before the church leaders. They were threatened, beaten, and those who would not give up their faith in the Word of God were killed.

As children, they had been prepared for the tortures they must one day endure; now angels stood by their sides. Many were burned at the stake, the smoke, mingled with their praises, ascending to God in heaven.

“For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ.” (II Corinthians 1:5)

In these things, the Vaudois are a good example for the last generation of Christians. The last generation will be persecuted because they refuse to bow to the false teaching in regard to the Sabbath held by the Roman church. The true church of God will stand loyal to all of God's commandments, including the fourth one, which says that the seventh day, Saturday, is the Sabbath. The Roman church claims to have the power to change God's Sabbath. In the end the governments of the world (led by the United States) will enforce this false teaching and persecution will be the lot once again of God's true church. “And it was given unto him (the beast power or papacy of the Roman church) to make war with the saints, and to overcome them: and power was given him over all kindreds, and tongues and nations. And all that dwell upon the earth shall worship him whose names are not written in the book of life of the Lamb slain from the foundation of the world...as many as would not worship the image of the beast should be killed. And he causeth all, both small and great, rich and poor, free and bond, to receive a mark in their right hand, or in their foreheads: And that no man might buy or sell, save he that had the mark, (keep Sunday, the first day instead of Sabbath, the Seventh Day holy) or the name of the beast, or the number of his name.” (Revelation 13:7-8; 15-17)

image = “a likeness”

beast = “wild animal” the unpredictable characteristics of wild animals serve as effective representations of the attitudes and roles of this power. One minute they are calm and tolerant, and the next they become vicious and intolerant in attitude and conduct.

To escape their enemies, the Waldensians had to flee to the mountains. Driving their herds before them, they climbed the high slopes of the mountain above the valley. Songs of praise were on their lips.

Halfway up the mountain they found a cave with a platform of rock in front of it; straight down from the platform was a fearsome precipice. The Waldenses put their cattle and sheep inside. They then barricaded the doorway to the cave with huge stones. Strong men were stationed there. They thought they were safe.

Close on their heels, the enemy knew they were in the cave. They let down ropes from above, and soldiers climbed down on the platform. The Waldenses retreated further into the cave. The Roman soldiers collected wood and heaped it in front of the entrance to the cave. It was set on fire, and soon a huge volume of black smoke rolled into the cave. All the Waldenses in that cave suffocated. Three thousand perished. Their “crime” was taking the Bible as their only rule of faith and rejecting the non-Biblical teachings of the Roman church. When the soldiers went into the cave they took the property of the dead Waldenses.

Because the Waldenses would not give up their faith, the Roman church authorities became very angry. Rewards were offered for capturing the Waldenses or destroying their property. For money people betrayed their neighbors and friends. Little children were stolen to be educated in the Roman schools.

Many captives were tortured and killed; some were made galley slaves, forced to row large ships across the seas. What do you suppose these Waldensian slaves did while on the ships?

They witnessed to others by singing and quoting Scripture they had memorized as children.

The Waldenses knew they would never be safe in their beautiful valley. They packed their clothes and all the food they could carry and moved to the safety of the high rugged mountains. In the heights of these mountains they would still have their freedom to worship God as the Scriptures taught. There was no complaining; they accepted the price they must pay to worship God.

Some people kill eagles for money. People can sell eagles' bones, feathers, and feet. The feathers are sometimes sold for up to fifty dollars each! As the eagles are sold for money, so the Waldenses were sold out by their neighbors and "friends." "Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness' sake." (Matthew 5:10)

"For thus saith the Lord; Behold, he shall fly as an eagle, and shall spread his wings over Moab." (Jeremiah 48:40)

Eagles are masters of the air. They may soar for hours on their long, broad, powerful wings. The Waldenses became masters at living in the high rugged mountains of the Italian Alps. Soaring above the persecution of the world on the wings of faith.

Once again the Roman church sent their soldiers into the mountains after the Waldenses. The Bible tells us in Revelation 12:15 - 16 "And the serpent cast out of his mouth water as a flood after the woman, that he might cause her to be carried away of the flood. And the earth helped the woman; and the earth opened her mouth, and swallowed up the flood which the dragon cast out of his mouth." The serpent is Satan, the flood is the soldiers who tried to destroy the Waldenses. God opened the earth or used the things of nature to destroy the wicked soldiers. God watches over and protects His faithful people.

In the end of this world we are told of a similar kind of persecution, "And the dragon was wroth with the woman, and went to make war with the remnant of her seed, which keep the commandments of God, and have the testimony of Jesus Christ." (Revelation 12:17) That means Satan (the dragon) will try to destroy the church (the woman) who keep all of God's commandments (even the seventh day Sabbath) and keep all the sayings of all the prophets.

Peace but not Compromise

Another time the papal soldiers were led to the Meadow of the Tower. This was the Waldenses strongest refuge, the college and meeting place of their barbs and pastors was. (A barb was a Waldensian teacher.)

The Vaudois humbly asked for peace, but the leader of the Roman army, Cataneo, rejected them. He gave them three choices: (1) Go to the Roman Church's mass and give up the Bible truths; (2) be killed; or (3) fight for their lives. The Waldenses chose to fight. Although we do not condemn them, they are not our example in this: it is written, "The Lord shall fight for you, and ye shall hold your peace." (Exodus 14:14) Also notice how Jesus reacted to the mob who came to the Garden of Gethsemane and took him to eventually be crucified. (See Matthew 26:47-56.)

These commandment keeping people putting their aged, and sick people, and their goods upon their shoulders, and leading their children by the hand, went into the mountains. Songs of praise were upon their lips as they sang the Psalms fleeing up the rugged paths on the mountains. The Waldensian leaders arranged the people into fighting groups, each group with a post to defend.

Cataneo came with his host of soldiers and all their powerful fighting equipment. The Waldenses stood along the ridges with only their bows and arrows. They had put shields on their left arms made of animal skins and covered their bodies with the bark of the chestnut tree. Behind them in a rise of the ground were the women and children, the aged and the sick.

The enemy came up toward the Waldenses who shot arrows down upon the soldiers. As the Waldenses seemed to waver, it looked as if the enemy would soon be upon them. Those behind fell upon their knees and put their hands up in supplication to God, crying, "O God of our fathers, help us! O God, deliver us."

The enemy heard the cry; so did the God of heaven. One proud captain (like Goliath) raised the visor of his helmet, uttering threats and cursings. At that moment an arrow struck him between the eyes, and he fell to the earth-dead.

As this Roman leader fell, the papal army began to retreat. The Waldenses chased them down the bank like a spring torrent cascading down the mountain side. The enemy was completely routed, and the Waldenses praised God for the victory He had given them.

Cataneo was ashamed and angry at being defeated by these herdsmen. He again assembled his troops and marched back to deal with the Waldenses. He found no one. He led them on, still there was no resistance. The homes of the Waldenses were empty. The finely cultivated fields and vineyards obviously had been vacated for but a short time. After much searching, Cataneo found the single path of escape that opened through the mountain.

Cataneo ordered his men to enter this frightful pathway leading up a rocky ledge; it was so narrow that only two men could walk side by side. There would be no room to fight if they were attacked.

The papal soldiers advanced as best they could along the narrow ledge. It seemed they would catch their prey and destroy them.

But once again God was watching over His people. As the enemy soldiers were advancing along the narrow path, a white cloud, no bigger than a man's hand, gathered on the mountain summit. The cloud became bigger and blacker. It began to descend. It came rolling down the mountainside, wave after wave. It fell right upon the papal army in the chasm, filling it from top to bottom with a thick black fog. It was like night! They could not see where to go ahead or behind. They halted in terror.

Above, the Waldenses, knowing that God was helping them, came from hiding and spread out over the slopes of the mountain. While the papal army stood in terror and bewilderment, the Waldenses tore up huge stones, and sent them thundering down the mountainside. Many papal soldiers were crushed. Some Waldenses boldly attacked the remainder of the papal army, forcing them to flee down the mountain. In their panic they hit into one another and in the struggle threw one another down. Some were trodden to death, others fell or were pushed over the precipice and died on the rocks below.

Once more the papal army was defeated as God defended His faithful people. "Ye have seen what I did unto the Egyptians, and how I bare you on eagles' wings, and brought you unto myself" (Exodus 19:4)

High Up

An eagle hunts in many different ways. It may perch on a high branch very patiently looking for prey. Or he may soar in the sky, always searching. Even a sneak attack is sometimes used.

When prey is spotted, the eagle folds its wings and down it goes in one of the most powerful and accurate maneuvers in the winged kingdom.

"... they shall fly as the eagle that hasteth to eat." (Habakkuk 1:8)

The eagle's beak is well designed to cut, tear, and crush. The strong jaw muscles help the beak perform its task. At the base of its beak is a bare area called the cere. Sometimes the cere is the same color as the beak, but it can may be brightly colored: red, yellow or blue. The eagle breathes through nostrils high up on its beak. Eagles do not have a good sense of smell.

Eagle's ears are hidden under special feathers just behind their eyes and are not used much in hunting. They are used when listening to one another, or for storms. In a storm an eagle must find shelter, for a soaked, wet eagle may not be able to fly.

It is difficult for eagles to find food when snow blankets the ground, and lakes and rivers are frozen. Eagles that live in the north migrate to the south where there is plenty to eat.

After the winter is over the northern eagles return to their homes. They return to the same nesting area. Apparently eagles find their way back by landmarks with the positions of the sun and stars to guide them. Eagles, like the Waldenses, watch the boundaries of their territory with alertness. The eagles vigorously defend their territory against all who enter it. Battles in the air are common along territorial lines.

Hunting ranges, however, may extend far beyond the nesting territory of an eagle. Hunting ranges are shared peacefully with other eagles and may overlap.

High, Rocky Mountains

Like the eagles, the Waldenses lived, hunted, and grew gardens high in the mountains, and made primitive homes among the rocks and caves. Although guards were stationed at the mountain pathways to warn of approaching danger, many faithful Waldenses were captured and carried away.

The leader of the Roman church was determined to destroy the Waldenses. He made an announcement that he would “forgive the sins of anyone who would war against the ‘unbelievers.’” Soldiers (mercenaries) from France and Italy joined to search for the Waldenses.

These soldiers swarmed over the mountains searching for God’s faithful people. This forced the Waldenses to move higher and still higher into the towering refuge of the Alps. These children of God climbed on dangerous paths; one misstep would have plunged them to their death far below. With songs of praise now quivering upon their lips, yet uncomplaining, they fled for their lives.

The Waldenses learned to know their mountain retreats well; they knew which paths were safe and which were not. They were familiar with the secret places where they could safely hide.

Copying the Bible

In their stone caves or crude dwellings the young people spent long hours in copying portions of the Bible. “Angels from heaven surrounded these faithful workers.” (GC 69) Each day the children and youth studied and memorized parts of the Scriptures. When the children were older they were taught by their barbs or pastors. Barb means Uncle. Before the invention of the printing press, the barbs copied large portions of the Scriptures for the use of their students. The students were taught language and instructed in purity and good works. The barbs taught and spoke the language of the people.

Every year in September the barbs held a council to review the work of each student, to examine and ordain young ministers and to select the missionaries who were to visit the distant churches in Italy and other countries. A few young people were prepared to attend the universities in Italy or France.

As the parents told their youth good-bye, they knew they might never see them again. These young people would teach others to worship God according to the Scriptures. If they were discovered by the Roman leaders, they would be killed. These youth were willing to give their lives that others could learn the truth about God.

It was forbidden by the Roman church for a lay person to have a Bible. Only the priest and church officials were allowed to read the Scriptures. (And mostly they did not bother to do it) So these Waldensian youth had their clothes especially made to hide precious pages of hand-copied Scriptures in the lining of their coats. They would carefully watch for a chance to share the truth with an interested person. If the person with whom they shared was an enemy, the Waldensian was captured, tortured, and put to death. But God’s Word must be shared-no matter what it cost them!

Missionaries

To be a Waldensian (Vaudois) minister, a person had to have some experience as an evangelist, often acquired as a student of a local barb. Next the candidate would need to serve

three years in some mission field before he could be in charge of a church at home. His life would be one of toil and hardship rather than the earthly wealth and glory of the priests of the Roman church.

Each minister must have a trade or profession so he could work undercover as he went forth from the mountains. Waldensian young people spent part of each school day mastering such a trade.

Every year the Waldenses sent forth missionaries out to the cities below their mountain retreats. They were sent in pairs: an older man (barb or minister) accompanied by a younger man. Many times these missionary journeys lasted for three years. These were dangerous trips over cold, snowy paths with enemies lurking everywhere. Remember, they would practice some type of work to cover their real purpose; so they usually traveled disguised in the humble garb of a tradesman.

Other missionaries traveled as merchants of beautiful silks, jewels, and other costly items. When they showed their wares they would watch for God to open a way for them to talk to the people about Him, or even share the carefully hidden copies of parts of the Bible when there was an interest.

The work of the missionaries began in the plains and valleys at the foot of their mountains and went outward. With their feet naked, and in coarse, travel-stained garments, they went forth to sow the seeds of truth. In every town they found people who welcomed them. Honest souls longed to be forgiven of their sins and to learn about a Saviour who died to set them free.

At the end of the day the missionaries would return to where they were staying to pray and praise God together. They would encourage one another; the older man would counsel and guide the younger missionary. The two would grow very close, like a father and a son, as they worked together.

On any night the missionaries might hear the loud pounding at their door. Then they knew they were discovered and would face certain death. They counted it joy that they might suffer for Christ's sake.

"How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him that bringeth good tidings, that publisheth peace; that bringeth good tidings of good, that publisheth salvation; that saith unto Zion, Thy God reigneth!" (Isaiah 52:7)

Hunters

Eagles are predators. That means they live by hunting, killing, and eating other animals. In this world of sin, they help nature by capturing the weak and sick animals. This prevents the spread of disease; healthier animals survive. Also, if there are too many animals, there would not be enough food for them all. The eagles catch rats, mice, and other small animals that destroy farmers' crops. Eagles will also feed on dead carcasses.

"For wheresoever the carcase is, there will the eagles be gathered together." (Matthew 24:28)

The Waldensian missionaries were also hunters, looking for the weak and sin sick; they hoped to stop the spread of this worst of all diseases. New life in Christ offered true spiritual health. But unlike the ecosystem of the eagle, in Jesus' kingdom there is enough "Bread of Life" for all. The seed sown by these brave Vaudois continues to yield an increase as each new generation of Christians learns of their shining example.

Precious Jewels

A merchant missionary might say, "I have precious jewels of far more value than these I have shown you. If you will protect me from the priests I will share them with you." The curious people promise to do so, and the Waldensian missionary would recite from memory or show the precious hand-copied Scriptures. Many times on bended knees, with quivering lips and tearful eyes, the Scriptures are opened to interested ones. In this way many became believers as the precious seeds of truth were planted. These believers, in turn, shared with still others.

Little companies would meet to fellowship together with the Waldensian missionaries. Then the messenger of truth would go on his way; in all probability his converts never heard of him again. What was his fate? Perhaps he made his way to another land, or languished in some dungeon, or his bones lay where he had been martyred for the truth of the precious Bible.

To be a good hunter, a bird needs powerful feet, a sharp beak, strong jaw muscles, quickness and skill in flying, and above all keen eyesight. This perfectly describes the eagle.

The Waldenses needed penetrating and discerning spiritual eyes. By recognizing who was an enemy and who was a friend, their mission was prolonged. "I counsel thee to...anoint thine eyes with eyesalve, that thou mayest see." (Revelation 3:18)

You have perhaps heard someone say, "You have eagle-eyes." That means you have good eyesight. The eagle's eyes are set closer to the front of the head than those of most birds. It has binocular vision. By this it can judge distance and speed. An eagle sees a rat a half mile away with its binocular vision, and it knows how fast it must fly in order to catch the rat. The eagle's special eyes give it super-accurate depth perception. Diving at speeds of over 100 miles per hour, an eagle has to know exactly when to pull out of a dive, or it would crash into the ground.

Troubadours

In the days of the Waldenses it was said that there were three missionaries that traveled in the south of Europe: the barbs, the troubadour, and, of course (mightiest of all), the Bible.

The troubadours would travel with their musical instruments and with news of the outside world. As a troubadour approached a medieval castle the people were excited to hear any news and to enjoy the minstrel play and sing for their entertainment.

The Waldensian missionaries would sing songs which taught the precious truths of the Bible. Many times the people listened and wanted to hear more from the singing evangelists. The people were taught in song that the Bible was the only rule of faith, and Christ the only foundation of salvation.

These Vaudois troubadours would often travel on foot from castle to castle singing the truths of the Bible.

Although God did not primarily design them for this purpose, an eagle's feet are well suited to catch and kill their prey. Each foot has four toes, with a sharp pointed claw at the end called a talon. Eagle's feet vary species to species because each has different kind of prey; however, all eagles attack their prey in much the same way. Just as it is about to strike its prey, the eagle opens its wings to slow down and puts its legs straight out so hitting with full force. Such a powerful blow usually kills the prey.

The Waldensian troubadours were skillful at catching souls for the kingdom of God. Their weapons were "not carnal, but mighty through God to the pulling down of strong holds." (II Corinthians 10:4) They wielded not talons but the sword of the Spirit, the word of God. "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

Strength and Courage

The eagle has long been a symbol of strength, courage, and power. The Waldensian Christians, like the eagle, were truly a people of strength, courage, and power. The more they were persecuted, the more they grew. Companies of Waldensian believers sprang up all over Italy.

Finally, the Roman leaders determined to destroy them completely. A decree was made that ordered the Waldenses to leave the country at once, or they would all be killed. Soldiers came and mercilessly drove anyone of the Waldensian faith into the rugged mountains. These mountains were covered with snow, and many families did not have time to properly prepare for the cold weather.

Bands of robbers and outlaws joined the Roman soldiers to help destroy the Waldenses. Many Waldenses died: some from the terrible cold; some by the hands of soldiers and outlaws.

As the Waldenses became fewer in number the Roman church leaders rejoiced. Now they could better control the minds of the people.

Spreading the Gospel

Destroying the Waldensian believers only served to spread the gospel. Through their Bible scrolls, the spirit of truth lived on to give the message. Even though the Roman church leaders also tried to destroy the Word, many of the precious Bible scrolls were hidden in mountain caves where the Roman soldiers could not find them.

The Waldensians kept the light of faith burning brightly for many centuries. They were persecuted and reviled, but they continued to send out their missionaries with the precious hand-copied Scriptures.

“... They were hunted to death; yet their blood watered the seed sown, and it failed not of yielding fruit. Thus the Waldenses witnessed for God centuries before the birth of Luther. Scattered over many lands, they planted the seeds of the Reformation that began in the time of Wycliffe, grew broad and deep in the days of Luther, and is to be carried forward to the close of time by those who also are willing to suffer all things for `the Word of God, and for the testimony of Jesus Christ.’ Revelation 1:9” (GC 78) “Blessed are they which are persecuted for righteousness’ sake: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” (Matthew 5:10)

Eagles of the World

There are fifty-nine species of eagles in the world. They are found on every continent except Antarctica. Some live in the thick forests of the tropical jungles. Others live in high mountains or on the shores of rivers, lakes, and oceans. Some live even where there are no trees.

Eagles are divided into four main groups (species): fish eagles, snake eagles, giant forest eagles, and booted eagles. These four names aptly describe the eagles of each group.

Fish eagles usually live near rivers, lakes, or oceans because their main diet is fish. They live in North America, Europe, Asia, and Africa.

The snake eagle catches snakes for food. They live in Europe and Africa and a few in Asia, India, and the Philippines.

Giant forest eagles live in the rain forests of South America, New Guinea, and the Philippines. They hunt lemurs, monkeys, and sloths.

The booted eagles are covered all over with feathers, even their legs; they look like they are wearing boots. These eagles are not fussy eaters so they live most everywhere in the world. The golden eagle is the most common booted eagle.

Persecution caused the pure truth of the Waldenses to spread, like the habitats of eagles, to many parts of the world.

A Constant Testimony

“The Waldensian missionaries were invading the kingdom of Satan, and the powers of darkness aroused to greater vigilance Every effort to advance the truth was watched by the prince of evil, and he excited the fears of his agents. The papal leaders saw a portent of danger to their cause from the labors of these humble itinerants. If the light of truth were allowed to shine unobstructed, it would sweep away the heavy clouds of error that enveloped the people. It would direct the minds of men to God alone and would eventually destroy the supremacy of Rome.

“The very existence of this people, holding the faith of the ancient church, was a constant testimony to Rome’s apostasy, and therefore excited the most bitter hatred and persecution. Their refusal to surrender the Scriptures was also an offense that Rome could not tolerate. She determined to blot them from the earth. Now began the most terrible crusades against God’s

people in their mountain homes. Inquisitors were put upon their track, and the scene of innocent Abel falling before the murderous Cain was often repeated.” (GC 76)

Finally

“Again and again were their fertile lands laid waste, their dwellings and chapels swept sway, so that where once were flourishing fields and the homes of an innocent, industrious people, there remained only a desert. As the ravenous beast is rendered more furious by the taste of blood, so the rage of the papists was kindled to greater intensity by the sufferings of their victims. Many of these witnesses for a pure faith were pursued across the mountains and hunted down in the valleys where they were hidden, shut in by mighty forests and pinnacles of rock.

“No charge could be brought against the moral character of this proscribed class. Even their enemies declared them to be a peaceable, quiet, pious people. Their grand offense was that they would not worship God according to the will of the pope. For this crime every humiliation, insult, and torture that men or devils could invent was heaped upon them.” (GC 76, 77)

At one time religious meetings were not allowed. A person caught attending a meeting would lose his life and property. It was decreed that all barbs and pastors must join the Roman church or leave the country in 15 days. It was also a law that when a baby was born it must be given to the Curates eight days after birth. If not, the mother would be whipped in public, and the father would be put in the galleys* for five years.

* a large, low ship of olden times moves by oars and sails

The undaunted Waldenses quoted Bible verses: “He that endureth to the end shall be saved,” and “I can do all things through Christ, which strengtheneth me.” (Matthew 10:22; Philippians 4:13)

One fatal day the order was given to depopulate* the Piedmont Valley. Terrible were the persecutions that took place. *kill all the people.

Forty-two men and a few women and children escaped to the heights of one mountain and as many to another. They lived in caves and ate wild herbs and the meat of animals.

As the eagle shelters its young from the burning sun, by spreading its wings over it, so God was the protection of the Waldenses. “Keep me as the apple of the eye, hide me under the shadow of thy wings, from the wicked that oppress me, from my deadly enemies, who compass me about.” (Psalm 17:9)

Many (12,000-13,000) were killed and many others taken to the prisons of Turin, Italy. Four thousand babies were taken from their mothers and given to the Roman church people to raise. Five hundred men were sent to the galleys.

Eight thousand died in the prisons of Turin. Those who lived were fed black bread and foul (dirty) water. They slept on bare bricks, on the bare earth, or wet, vermin* infested straw. There was no light, and the sick and dying were everywhere. In the summer the heat was unbearable; in the winter they suffered from extreme cold. *small animals like insects; fleas, lice and mites.

One day an order came to set those free that still lived and to send them over the mountains to Switzerland. After much suffering, the Waldenses were released to climb over the freezing, snow-covered mountains. In rags, totally unprepared for the bitter cold, many more lost their lives. The dawn revealed the mountain strewn with the dead.

Thin, weary, sick, famished, and half-clothed, three thousand Vaudois finally reached Switzerland. With loving compassion the Swiss people welcomed these poor souls, took them in, and gave them shoes and woolen garments to keep them warm. How thankful the Waldensian survivors were for the friendly Swiss and for God’s deliverance. Most of all they were thankful for the freedom and safety to worship God as the Bible said they should.

“Living thanks always for all things unto God and the Father in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.” (Ephesians 5:20)

"For God is not unrighteous to forget your work and labour of love, which ye have shewed toward his name, in that ye have ministered to the saints, and do minister." (Hebrews 6:10)

"But they that wait upon the LORD shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint." Isaiah 40:31

Strength

For the strength of the hills we bless Thee,
Our God, our fathers' God!
Thou hast made thy children mighty
By the touch of the mountain sod.
Thou hast fixed our ark of refuge.
Where the spoilers' foot ev'er trod:
For the strength of the hills we bless Thee,
Our God, our fathers' God!

The banner of the chieftain
Far, far below us waves:
The war-horse of the spearman,
Cannot reach our lofty caves;
Thy dark clouds warp the threshold.
Of freedom's last abode:
For the strength of the hills we bless Thee,
Our God, our fathers' God.

For the dark, resounding heavens,
Where thy still, small voice is heard;
For the strong pines of the forests.
That by the breath are stirred;
For the storms on whose free pinions
Thy Spirit walks abroad:
For the strength of the hills we bless thee,
Our God, our fathers' God.

For the shadow of thy presence
Round our camp of rock outspread:
For the stern defiles of battle.
Bearing record of our dead:
For the snows and for the torrents,
For the free heart's burial-sod:
Our God, our fathers' God!

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